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DWARF'S BLOOD

Adam's Blood

By
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TO
REX WHISTLER

CHAPTER I

SIR HENRY ROXERBY was dead. As far as Brokeyates was concerned, he might well have died years earlier, for the place had begun to go to rack and ruin long before he took to his bed. During those last five years, the main drive had never been used. Sir Henry had no visitors, and the butcher and the baker preferred to reach the house by the stable entrance, near the churchyard. It was thus possible almost to avoid the Park altogether, and none of the village people cared about going farther into that than was absolutely necessary. It had a haunted look.

But now, the men who drove the hearse opened the great gates once more. The unwonted movement snapped one of the rusty hinges, and the iron gate fell forward, and lay across the wet roadway, embedded in the sodden brown leaves which had lain there since they were swept under the arch by the storm of last November. Grumbling and swearing, the men forced the gate back, and the hearse passed through, to be followed later in the morning by several carriages and motors. The old drive was found to be almost impassable. It had become

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little more than a rough track across the Park, its course indicated by the deep ruts made by an occasional farm cart. Grass had grown all over it, and great shaggy weeds. The ditches had not been cleaned out for years, and here and there the muddy water collected in stagnant puddles. In many places, the undergrowth had invaded the road, almost obliterating it, and now and again, a rotting bough lay, barring the way. When one of these was moved it fell to pieces, crumbling into damp dust. On the high ground in the Park, where the deer had scampered about in the old days, last year's crop of thistles and nettles stood brown and withered against the heavy January sky. They spoke of poverty and neglect.

The house was a white Georgian one, and its stones had proved solid enough to withstand twenty years of penury, although the steps were crumbling. There was no paint left on the window frames, and the rain had got into the wood, splintering it in many places, while one of the windows in the west wing had been actually blown out, so that the wintry weather drove across the floor of the room. Lying in bed at the far end of the house, Sir Henry had been unaware of this, but even if he had known, he would have done nothing. His pride in his house had long ago turned into a bitter pride in its decay. The country people said that the old gentleman had

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been crossed in love as a young man, and that since then he had never had the heart to look after the old place. He had sat by and watched its ruin.

Sir Henry had outlived most of his contemporaries, and he had never had any friends. His attitude to life was defeatist, and his rancour against the Present showed itself in a sullen determination to give no Future to the home of his ancestors. He knew that when he died, his title must go to the grandson of that only brother of his, whom he had hated so bitterly: he could not prevent that. But he was resolved that the estate which went with the title should be nothing but an inheritance of ruin and decay.

Ten or twelve neighbours had driven across the Park in the wake of the hearse, and they collected in the library waiting for the coffin to be carried downstairs. It was many years since the noble room had seen the light of day. Ann Dybbe, the old woman who, with her husband, had 'done for the squire' for the past fifteen years, had opened the shutters that morning, and had done her feeble best to dust the glass in the lower panes of the windows. Through them there struggled the half-light which had made its way through the overgrown box bushes outside. The walls of the room were for the most part covered with great leather-bound volumes, and these absorbed most of the light which succeeded in getting into the room.

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From these books there came a curious corpse-like smell of centuries of dust.

On the round table in the middle of the room, Mrs. Dybbe had put a plate of sandwiches, flanked by three or four bottles of beer, and some heavy cut-glass tumblers; but her attempt at hospitality was ignored by the little group of men who stood in the library. Instead, they tried, in the semi-darkness, to examine the room, now seen by most of them for the first time. The great ceiling painting of *Prometheus chained to the Rock* had really fallen to bits. Part of it lay broken on the floor, and wide cracks ran in all directions across what was left. Over the fireplace, there still hung the Reynolds picture which had once been the pride of Broke-yates and, in the broken frame, Sir Joshua's Lady Roxerby stood like a pillar of dust in an avenue of dust laden trees. The needlework hung threadbare on the fine Chippendale chairs, and the dust was so thick upon the beautiful old Indian carpet that it was impossible to see how much of it was left. The heavy silence of the room sank down upon its occupants, and no one spoke. They listened.

Staggering footsteps sounded overhead: and then the men were heard on the stairs, moving with that terrible, uncertain, weighted tread which has trampled upon so many hearts during the hundreds of years during which coffins have

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been carried out of houses. The sound brings with it the realization of man's helplessness in face of death.

The listeners exchanged glances, and signified by movements of the head that the moment had come for them to pick up their hats and go to the churchyard. They left the house, and followed the coffin on foot.

Although Sir Henry Roxerby was the senior County magistrate, he had not appeared on the Bench for many years. Still, most of his fellow Justices thought it was their duty to pay a last token of respect to one of their number, and no one else seemed to be present at the funeral.

The church was only a few hundred yards away, and when the little procession reached the gate, it was seen that most of the villagers were collected in the churchyard.

The burial of the Squire was the one and only entertainment arranged for them by the great house within the memory of most of them. Many of the tenants and labourers had never even seen the master whose coffin they now silently watched as it was lowered into the grave. The vicar was reading words familiar to them all. He had read them over the bodies of their own kith and kin; and suddenly the Squire was near to them. Hitherto, he had been only the invisible, and rather evil, influence responsible for their tumble-

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down cottages and their impure water supply. Now, he was one with them. As he was, so they would all be one day. They gazed, impressed and expressionless. The bell tolled, and a baby cried in its perambulator.

When the service was over, everyone seemed relieved. The neighbours who had attended the funeral could throw off the horrid sense of helplessness which had come upon them in the house. The world was once more normal. The air was clear, and a thrush was singing somewhere. Cigarettes and pipes were lit, and voices broke into ordinary conversation. Carriages drove up, and their owners got into them with genial farewells. It had been an unhappy scene. Less painful, perhaps, than when death has left living sorrow behind: and yet the fact that not one person had been found to mourn for Sir Henry Roxerby made it the more poignant a sight to see his coffin disappear. He seemed already to have reached the oblivion which awaits us all in a hundred years or so.

Old Colonel Bracton had given Arthur Fanshawe a lift, and he drove him back to Radway for luncheon after the funeral. The Colonel was, perhaps, the only person in the county who still remembered Brokeyates in the old days; and now, with the loquacity of his eighty-five years, he was glad of an audience for his reminiscences. He had

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already given them at considerable length to his grand-daughter Alethea, and, unlike many men of his age, he disliked telling the same story more than once to the same person. He therefore felt it was impossible to relate again to Alethea the story of Sir Henry's quarrel with his brother; although he saw no reason why she should not accept the traditional role of the lady of the house, and sit by while he told it to someone else.

'Yes, I suppose there's no one left in the county who knew Henry Roxerby as I did. We were boys together. Not that we were ever specially friendly. My friend was his brother Bob, who was at Rugby with me, while Henry was at Eton. But it was not only because we were schoolfellows, for no one could look at Henry if Bob was by. He was the handsomest fellow I ever saw, and he had a wonderful charm. Henry was quite different, a heavy-looking fellow, short-sighted, and a bad shot. He was stupid too, and he hadn't got the sense to hide that he was desperately jealous of Bob. It made him sulky when they were together, and so he showed up worse than ever. But of course Henry had the money, as well as the place and the title, and in those days the Roxerbys were very well off indeed. Henry had the whip hand there and he knew it. Bob had only got about £200 a year, and you can bet that Henry wasn't going to make it any easier for him. He was dead

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keen to push him out to make his own living. And then at last they both fell in love with the same girl. That was the end of everything.'

The Colonel paused to give Arthur another slice from the saddle of mutton.

Arthur took advantage of the interval to remark sagely that of course Bob married the lady.

'No he didn't. But she was a beautiful creature, was Dulcibella Cheverell. I once thought of marrying her myself. Most people did, in those days. However, she did fall in love with Bob, and I suppose she couldn't help that. They would have made a very fine pair, but when it came to the point, she couldn't face being poor. That £200 a year of Bob's stuck in her throat, and though she had told Bob she would wait for him, when Henry came along and proposed, she accepted him. Henry had no idea how matters stood between the girl and his brother. If he had guessed it, he would never have thought of falling in love with her, for he always hated anyone Bob liked. I think I was the only person who knew the truth. Bob had confided in me, and I shall never forget the night when he came over here and told me she had given him up for his own brother.'

Here Colonel Bracton drank a glass of claret.

'He was terribly hard hit,' he went on. 'It absolutely broke him up. He couldn't see her again, but he just burnt his boats and went off to

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Australia. And then Dulcibella found that she couldn't go through with it. She found Henry quite impossible, and I don't wonder at it. But she behaved very badly. A week before the day fixed for the wedding, she threw him over, and she made it as bad for him as she could. I suppose she thought she would cure him of being in love; but she told him outright that she had never cared for him, and had cared for Bob all along. The Roxerbys never forgave each other. Each had spoilt the other's life, and neither of them had got the lady. They each blamed the other, but they never met again. Bob didn't live long. He was drowned, crossing a river in the bush, and I suppose he didn't make much of a fight for his life. He was always a first-rate swimmer, and he could have saved himself if he'd had a mind to. However, he married out there, "caught on the rebound", as they say, and he left a son. The boy was Henry's heir, and the old fellow wouldn't forgive that either. He ought to have married and got children of his own, but he was too bitter against women. He would never pay any one of 'em the compliment of making her his wife; so he just sulked and let his place go to pieces. It was his way of paying out Bob, and it showed what a fool he was, because of course, Bob never knew a thing about it. Everybody's land went down in the seventies, and the rest of us made the best of it and

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tried to carry on. Roxerby would do no such thing. He shut himself up at Brokeyates, and let the place tumble about his ears. He went nowhere and he never had a soul to the place. To-day, you saw the end of it all.'

'So this man, who is coming from Australia, is Sir Henry's nephew.'

'His great-nephew. Bob's son died, but he seems to have done well for himself first, and married a woman with a lot of money, the daughter of a business man in Melbourne. I hear the boy is a millionaire, and he could do anything he likes to the place. Of course he may not want to live at Brokeyates, and I should hardly expect him to take a fancy to it, seeing it for the first time in such a condition.'

'Lovely as it is, I can't believe he could choose to live there,' said Alethea. 'It looks so terrible. An unhappy, fatal place.'

'Still it is a fine house, and a beautiful Park,' said Arthur. 'He has never seen anything like it in Australia!'

'You may safely say that,' Colonel Bracton answered. 'And I would venture to go further, and assert that he wouldn't see anything quite like it anywhere else in the world. I, for one, never saw such a sight. And when I remember the place as it was! It shocked me very much, and I almost wish I hadn't gone there to-day. I had lots of very

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happy memories connected with that library. It was a part of my boyhood. And when I think of it as I saw it this morning, I feel as if I had looked into a vault.'

CHAPTER II

UNLIKE MOST reputed millionaires, who are usually not much better off than their neighbours, Sir Nicholas Roxerby was, if anything, even richer than he was said to be. He had no idea how much money he had. He only knew that he and his mother had never come within sight of its margin. And, too, the fortune increased every year, for the business was still flourishing, as Mrs. Roxerby had inherited not only her father's riches, but the talent for accumulating them which had been possessed by the last two generations of her family. She managed the Melbourne works herself, making them, as time went on, more and more prosperous.

Sir Henry Roxerby died on the last day of the nineteenth century, and Nicholas was then twenty-five. The young man had plenty of ability, but this had found but little outlet in a business dominated by Mrs. Roxerby. He was glad to leave Australia, and to find himself at once independent, and the owner of an estate which it seemed would make such demands upon him. The name of Brokeyates had been poetry in his ear since he was

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a boy, and he could scarcely believe that his dream had materialized, that the moment had come when he could actually walk into this enchanted land. He came to England determined to find in it the purpose of his life, and the outlet for his fortune. He turned his back upon the long misery of his youth.

He did not reach Brokeyates till nearly six months after the death of Sir Henry, and during that time, the process of decay had continued. Yet the place had now a less doleful appearance. It was a radiant morning in May when Nicholas motored from London to see his home for the first time. Beside him in the car was Mr. Briscowe, the old family lawyer, in whose eyes Brokeyates was nothing but a disgrace. The evidences of neglect made him blush for the family which had employed his firm for the past four generations, and the name of Briscowe too seemed tarnished. He trembled to think of the effect which such dilapidation must make on the mind of a man accustomed to the brisk methods of a prosperous new country.

When they got to the drive, they found that those old ruts were worse than ever. The car jolted and swayed most alarmingly. It forced its way through bushes and brambles, now trespassing further than ever upon the road, for no one had attempted to control the ramping new life which surged through them in the spring. Un-

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hindered, they had sent out their shoots and branches, and tangled tendrils in all directions, lavishly spreading their lawless beauty around. Above the untidy undergrowth, the gallant old chestnuts of the ancient avenue still held up their thousand torches of red and white flame; and all around them the undulating parkland broke into billows of may-blossom. The hawthorn, of all trees, is the true emblem of the English country side.

The motor reached the summit of a little hill, and Nicholas looked down for the first time upon the house which had called him from one hemisphere to another. Before him, the ground fell away into a wide irregular valley, the sides of which were sprinkled with hundreds of may-trees, while bluebells rushed in sheets across the grass, to mirror themselves at last in the water of the lake. Nicholas told the chauffeur to pull up for a few moments, and he looked silently down upon Brokeyates. From the point they had reached, it was not possible to see that the house was on the verge of falling down. It shone clear and white against the belt of woodland which clothed the hill behind it, running away to the horizon. There was dignity in the solid unpretentious building. It had a character of reserve and composure. The house was entirely without ornament, and the beauty which it possessed was that intrinsic beauty

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which comes from sure proportions, thoughtful fenestration, and a sincere purpose in the placing of every line.

Nicholas was silent. Mr. Briscowe watched his face, and it was almost expressionless. With his eyes fixed upon the house, the young man was really looking deep down into himself. This place, he thought, must hold the key to his past. Surely here was the secret of the eternal dissatisfaction of his boyhood—of that incessant sense of thwarting against which he had vainly rebelled. In his blood he must always have felt this ancient dignity, making the Australian air taste bitter in his mouth. He resolved that this must be so.

There was not a person in sight. No labourers crossed the Park: no gardeners worked around the house: no old woman weeded in the untidy flower-beds. Only the wild fowl flew away in companies from the lake, their harsh yet lovely voices crying a protest against the interlopers. Nicholas felt as if he were looking down upon the palace of the Sleeping Beauty, but he did not say so to Mr. Briscowe, knowing that grown men do not concern themselves with fairy stories.

Mr. Briscowe would certainly have been surprised if he could have seen into his companion's mind, for the old lawyer was considering the place with unmitigated disgust. It was worse than he expected—far worse than it had been five months

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earlier. It would have distressed him to see any place so fallen into decay, but in this case, the pain he felt was a personal one. Here was the family seat of one of his firm's oldest clients, and into this condition of ruin it had come. It was true that the lawyer could disclaim any actual responsibility for what he saw. It was years since Sir Henry had consented to see him. He had obstinately rejected all advice. He had shut himself up alone at Broke-yates, as if he hoped that the house would one day fall upon him and bury him in its ruins.

They drove on, and approached the house. Now Nicholas began to see something of what the lawyer had already seen. Certainly, Australia could never have produced so complete a wreck. He had not imagined that a fine building could become so nearly derelict. The very stones seemed rotting. The spring winds had worked further havoc among the window frames, and now it was not only one room which was laid open to the weather. Several windows gaped hollow and black, the sun finding in them no glass to reflect its rays. Moss was thick upon the steps, and the graceful iron handrail which flanked them was twisted and rusty.

Mr. Briscowe pulled the bell, and the handle came out in his hand. He knocked. The sound of the old knocker clattered through the empty hall, and then were heard the hasty and tottering steps of someone who must surely be as old as the house

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itself. Ann Dybbe opened the door. The old woman was bent and feeble; her face was deeply lined, and her hands were deformed by rheumatism. She looked confused and troubled; for, after listening for the motor all through the morning, she had just dropped off to sleep, and the sound of the knocker had given her a fright. She peered rather crossly out, blinking in the sunlight. Once more, Nicholas felt himself thrown back upon the reading of his boyhood. This old hag might have come out of Walter Scott. He felt no dismay at the poverty of his welcome: on the contrary, he was elated.

Mrs. Dybbe invited the two gentlemen into the hall, but she did not accompany them when they went round the house. She had opened the shutters in all the rooms, but she had made no other preparations for the arrival at Brokeyates of its new master. The dust in the house had long gone beyond her control; and since Sir Henry's death, she had done nothing but let the air into the rooms on dry days, and look after her invalid husband. She imagined that she was taking care of the house, but she would have made a poor defence against thieves.

The two men walked through the rooms. Nicholas missed none of the signs of decay. He observed every crumbling plank in the floors, and he was well aware that the dreary smell which

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pervaded the rooms was caused by dry rot. No ragged scrap of peeling plaster escaped his eye. He saw every shred of torn wallpaper. He counted the places where the ceilings were broken, and the hingeless doors. But none of this dispelled his elation. Instead, it added to the atmosphere of romance which assured him, with every step he took, that he had escaped from the dead level of Australian business efficiency, and was in another world.

They came at last to the room in which Sir Henry had died. Its windows faced north, towards the copses which hung on the side of the hill, but no glimpse of the view could be obtained from them. The Squire had refused to allow his Virginia creeper to be cut, and its heavy boughs covered the windows, spreading a dismal shadow through the room. When Nicholas and Mr. Briscowe opened the door, they found that they were almost in darkness. In the grate, a few dusty coals sent out a little red gleam, and a sparse wisp of smoke.

Both men looked in some surprise at this sign of life. Nicholas walked to the fireplace, and tried to examine, in the uncertain light, what appeared to be a delicately modelled Adams mantelpiece, fouled with the smoke of years. As he did this, he was startled by a groan from the bed. Both he and Mr. Briscowe turned quickly in the direction of the

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sound, and they saw in the bed what seemed, in the semi-darkness, to be the outline of a very old man. There was on his face so little flesh tha the looked no more than a skull. The skin was drawn tightly over the nose, and its bone stood out like a beak, while the old eyes were lost in the deep sockets. A few straggly hairs escaped from beneath an old-fashioned night-cap, and two claw-like hands picked at the sheets.

Nicholas was not a man to expect the supernatural, but now he had no doubt that he was gazing upon the ghost of Sir Henry Roxerby. He held on to the mantelpiece and felt thankful that Mr. Briscowe was with him.

'Who be 'ee?' said a voice from the bed.

Mr. Briscowe set his eyeglasses upon his nose with the firm decision of a man about to read a will. He looked very prim.

'Who is there?' he asked, enunciating the syllables with extreme precision.

'Get along with 'ee,' continued the voice from the bed. 'That 'ere chimbly don't want no sweeping. Or be 'ee the Black come after I?'

Just then, Nicholas was aware of a movement immediately behind him. He sprang round, and saw Mrs. Dybbe.

'Excuse me, Sir Nicholas,' said the old woman, in a tone of great concern. 'I should have mentioned it, and I hope you won't be hard on me,

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but I took the liberty to put my husband in here when the old Squire were took. 'Tis the only room upstairs where we've 'ad the chimbley swept, and ever since my poor old man 'ad 'is seizure, 'e do feel the cold something terrible. I should have told you when you came, but it went out of my mind. I was that upset when I wasn't in the hall to give you my duty.'

Nicholas could hardly help laughing. All this was so completely in the picture. It was absurd, and yet, in a way, moving. The old retainer had crept up to die in his master's bed. He realized again that it was not only oceans and continents which separated him from Australia, and the realization delighted him. Yes; he was completely cut off from his past.

'That's all right,' he said, and his voice was more genial than Mr. Briscowe had as yet heard it. 'Very glad that you should keep him warm up here.'

And he led the way out of the room.

They went downstairs.

'I fear that all this must be very painful to you,' said Mr. Briscowe when they found themselves sitting in the library, having taken care to place their chairs in positions in which it seemed the least likely that pieces of the ceiling might fall on their heads.

'Painful?'

'You can hardly have expected, I fear, to find

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your heritage in so dilapidated a condition.'

'I don't exactly know what I did expect, but I knew that the place had been neglected for years. You warned me as to that in your first letter.'

'I had not then realized how bad it was, nor how large a sum would be required to make the place even habitable.'

'Ah! About how much?'

'It is impossible to say off-hand. One would have to go over the whole estate. But you could hardly even begin to live in the house, till you had spent three or four thousand pounds on it. It is barely standing up.'

Nicholas looked at him with an expression almost of amusement.

'But I am prepared to spend a great deal more than that,' he said. 'I love the place, I love it already. And I like to know that I've come into it at its worst, and that it's up to me to make it again what it once was. Or even to make a better place of it,' he went on, with an increased zest in his voice. 'Put me quickly into touch with the right experts. Who do you think is the best architect over here? Find me a model bailiff if you can. I want to begin at once. This is the chance of my life.'

He was pacing to and fro in the room, his face lit with a new animation; and Mr. Briscowe, as he watched him, saw that he was transformed. He

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had been struck from the first by the young man's appearance, but he had not seen this in him. He had observed the fine physique, the great length of limb, and the heavy shoulders with their air of immense strength. Nicholas held himself haughtily, his great head rather immobile on the big shoulders. His dark blue eyes were shadowed by overhanging brows: his jaw was hard and vigorous. One was aware of every bone in his face, and they were fine bones, firm and good in outline. Yet, as they drove down that morning, Mr. Briscowe had felt that all this force was in some way dormant. Nicholas had seemed surly, reserved, suspicious. He appeared to be keeping himself in hand, resolved not to show too much interest. And now all this had suddenly changed. The young man had come to life, and what had been almost repellent in him, was all at once, attractive and youthful.

As Nicholas said his last words, he came to a standstill, and he now faced Mr. Briscowe, standing, with his head thrown back, and with, on the wall behind him, a portrait in a murky frame. It was not a very good picture, but it must have been a good likeness, for it seemed to have come to life again in the member of the family who stood beneath it.

'He's a chip of the old block,' said Mr. Briscowe to himself.

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He was drawn to the young man. He had disliked Sir Henry. No other sentiment was possible in face of that bitter dejected old failure. But Mr. Briscowe had always wanted to be able to feel affection for the owner of Brokeyates. The relationship was traditional in his firm. But then, in the old days, the Roxerbys had been men of pride and breeding, for whom it had been a pride to work. Now it seemed that the heir was a man of the true breed. He must indeed be so, for he had been stirred to enthusiasm by the very sight of Brokeyates, even though he saw it for the first time, in this woeful condition of ruin.

Mr. Briscowe got up from his chair, and took Nicholas by the hand.

'It's going to be a tough job,' he said. 'But I believe you are the man to do it. And you are not too late, though you would have been so in another year or two. You see it isn't only this house which is falling down. It's the same with every farm and cottage on the estate. They are disgraceful from first to last. You don't know the worst yet. This is only the beginning.'

Nicholas smiled.

'It sounds alarming,' he said. 'But I'm not frightened. We will make, not this house alone, but every house on the place, something worth coming miles to see. I don't look upon it only as a matter of sentiment. Mark that. It's a business

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proposition. I mean to shovel capital into this land of mine, and to show you people over here, that with modern methods it's possible to make a success of farming in the old country.'

He spoke in the manner of those who believe that they know something which they can teach their grandmothers; but Mr. Briscowe thought that possibly such a disposition was not a bad one under the circumstances.

CHAPTER III

NICHOLAS ROXERBY might have been an artist, if he had not grown up entirely among hard-headed business men and women; but as things were, such an idea had never crossed his mind. Inarticulately, he had always desired the beauty which he could not find in his mother's world, and the name of Brokeyates had meant for him that unpossessed and remote ideal. He so bitterly disliked the business atmosphere in which he lived, that he could not see that the men who worked in it were after all doing something in their own day. They were, in a manner, artists too, creating great concerns, manipulating men's lives, and harnessing the forces of nature for what they considered to be the benefit of the human race. Such aspects of commerce had never kindled Nicholas's imagination as he worked resentfully in his mother's office.

Now he found himself at Brokeyates, and here was indeed waiting for him the beauty, the romance, and the poetry which had always been out of his reach; but he found that all this loveliness was on the very point of perishing for lack of

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the money and business capacity which he had taught himself to despise. After all, it was going to be what he had learnt in that hated office which would be of value to him now. The realization did not make him hate that office the less, but he did admit that he had gained something from his business apprenticeship. He would hardly have understood if he had been told that the recreation of Brokeyates was to be the one work of art of his life, although the technique he was to use would consist mainly of skill in business; yet this was none the less true. It was too late for Nicholas to begin to think in terms of art; but he had imagination, and it was all set on Brokeyates.

He set to work to restore the house, arresting its decay, and giving back to it that solid dignity which had been its peculiar possession. But he was determined that this should be done without giving it a renovated appearance, or banishing the spirit of romance which had hung about it, striking him in the heart like an arrow, at that moment when he had first looked down upon it from the top of the hill.

Weathered stones repaired the damages to the fabric of the house, renewed the crumbling steps, and rebuilt the tumble-down walls which had surrounded the garden. The Park was cleared of undergrowth and weeds, and the fine old trees stood out in their splendour. In the rooms, the

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restoration of plaster and woodwork was carried out with an almost slavish loyalty to the original fragments which remained; and although the house was 'modernized', the modernizing was hidden out of sight. And it was not only the house, the whole estate was taken in hand. Cottages became tidy and comfortable as if by miracle, and the farm buildings were made strong and efficient once more. Nicholas spared no money, but what he would not spare was time. He was in a desperate hurry, and he wanted everything to be done at once. He was prepared to pay any number of workmen, and to pay them any wages they asked, so long as the work went forward with the swiftness he desired.

He lived in the house from the first. Comfort, in itself, meant little to him, though his pride insisted that Brokeyates, when finished, should be furnished with every modern comfort. But, meanwhile he himself was perfectly content to live in two uncomfortable rooms in the servants' quarters, waited upon by Ann Dybbe and a young housemaid. The plainest food satisfied him, and he did not observe whether it was well or badly cooked. His one desire was to be on the spot to keep the workmen up to the mark. The incessant noise of hammers, saws, and chisels, disturbed him not at all. He was quite indifferent to the fact that the chairs and tables which he used, and indeed the

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very clothes which he wore, were thick with white dust. He was in the house to see his purpose carried out, and he had no other thought.

The men liked him, although there was no friendliness in his manner of dealing with them. He seemed hardly to know that they were human beings. They existed for him only in the work they did, and he gave credit for every well-placed stroke of the hammer. He missed nothing, seeming to know just how much labour had been employed in every finished detail. He was quick to see the difference between good work and bad, appreciating the one and never failing to point out the other. Though he was not sufficiently interested in the men themselves ever to learn to know their faces, he knew them by their work, and could nearly always be counted on to recognize by the craftsmanship, which man had carried out any particular job.

In the evenings, when the men had gone home, Nicholas moved—a lonely, dusty figure—among the ladders, the scaffolding, and the planks. Night-fall released the workers from their tools, to refresh themselves with a change of interest, but Nicholas wanted no change for his mind. Brokeyates was his obsession, and he enjoyed the hours when the men were away, and he could go over the house, reckoning the progress made each day. To him it seemed unbearably slow, though the architect

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found that his designs were actualized as if by magic. It was a new thing to be allowed to employ men by hundreds instead of by tens.

Nicholas had no visitors, for he knew no one in the neighbourhood, and indeed there was not a room in the house in which any tidy person could sit down. But Colonel Bracton insisted upon making friends. His house was barely a mile away, and, in spite of his eighty-five years, he often walked over to Brokeyates, and stood about with Nicholas for hours at a time, watching the men at work. Nicholas liked him, for he found that the old man was as interested as he was himself in what was going on. The two would stand side by side, often saying not one word for ten minutes or more, while they watched a piece of work being carried out. When they did speak, it was only to refer to some technical point, and Nicholas soon found that, like most old-time land-owners, the Colonel was a thoroughly practical man. No surveyor could know more about repairs than he did, no gardener more about gardens; and no elderly relation could have been more helpful when it was a question of how things had been in the old days. The Colonel realized, without any words being spoken, that what Nicholas wanted was to preserve the old traditions of the place; and that he was sensitive because he had no idea what those traditions had been. When the Colonel

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remembered something, he spoke as if Nicholas remembered it too. Each of the men would have repudiated the idea of sentiment, although it was nothing but a shared sentiment which held them together, outwardly absorbed in the processes of digging, sawing, mortar-mixing, or painting. They spoke of nothing but the practical work in hand.

On Sundays, Nicholas sometimes walked over to Radway for luncheon, and in this way he came to know Alethea. The girl had lived alone with her grandfather as long as she could remember, and had kept house for him even before she left the schoolroom. She knew how to sit silent while men talked, for she had been trained to this, and for some weeks Nicholas hardly observed her. He only knew that when the Colonel had completed the Sunday ceremony of carving the sirloin of beef and its remains had been carried away to the servants' hall, then it was Alethea's part to help the pudding. When the port wine appeared, she left them, murmuring something about the Sunday School, and she sometimes joined them later in the afternoon, when they were making the round of the stables and farmyard. It was only by slow degrees that she emerged for Nicholas as an individual; but when once she had done so, he was surprised to find how vividly she stood out. He wanted to hear her talk.

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By that time, Alethea, on her side, had arrived at a very definite opinion on the subject of the visitor. She felt she knew him very well, for she had watched him week after week, and had listened to what he said. Moreover, she and her grandfather often discussed the new neighbour when they were alone.

Colonel Bracton said that Nicholas was 'his grandfather over again'. Bob had always been the handsome one of the family, and the boy had his looks, his colouring, his height, and very much the same figure. He was also like Bob in his enthusiasm for what he was doing, and that made him altogether unlike Sir Henry. When Nicholas was in the house, Colonel Bracton felt that he was once more with his old friend; and as Nicholas was not more than twenty-five years old, the Colonel felt that he too was a boy again. He enjoyed this.

Alethea found Nicholas attractive. She admired his strength, his vigour, and his ability, and she also thought him far more original than he really was. Her experience was limited to life in an English county at the opening of this century, and she was astonished to find in Nicholas a complete freedom from conventions and prejudices which had appeared to her as irreversible as the laws of Nature. He was the first colonial she had met, and she fancied that he had created the type.

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It was a type which sometimes shocked her, and often startled her; but she thought it completely individual. Then too, combined with this force and independence of character, she found something in Nicholas which seemed to ask for her pity. She saw him as tragic. His face had traces, or so she thought, of some deep and smothered feeling, and it was this which really drew her to him. It set her pondering about him; and, curiously enough, it sent her mind back to an almost forgotten episode in her own childhood.

When Alethea was a little girl, she once spent her holidays with some boy cousins. She hated the visit, and she begged with tears that it might not be repeated. Nor was it. But she had never confessed to anyone the cause of her misery. Now, after all these years, it came back to her mind. One Sunday afternoon, she and the boys had gone for a walk together; and as they passed a thick old laurel bush which grew against the wall, they heard a movement among the leaves. Staring out at them, there appeared the yellow eyes of a cat. It was quite still, watching them. One of the boys picked up a stone, and threw it idly at the animal, meaning to drive it away; but instead it remained motionless, still staring out. And then, suddenly, her cousins had all become young savages. Each one armed himself with a handful of stones, and hurled them at the cat. They showered round it,

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rattling through the dark leaves of the laurel, and yet, in the midst of this storm of missiles, the cat remained uncannily still. It might have been dead, or some strange Egyptian effigy carved in granite, but for those frightful eyes, flaming with horrible pain, which glared at them out of the thicket. It seemed like the vision of a chained prisoner, dying slowly in anguish.

'Don't do it! Don't do it!' Alethea was crying in the background, but no one seemed to hear.

And then at last one of the boys solved the mystery. The cat was caught in a gin, and in its agony it had crawled into the tree, where the trap had become hopelessly wedged among the branches, while its merciless teeth still gripped the limb it had broken. The cat was chained there, helpless and immovable, to be stoned and tortured by its light-hearted enemies. Overcome with horror and remorse, the boys fled to ask a gardener to come and put an end to the cat's misery; while Alethea ran sobbing to her room, and was haunted night after night, by the memory of the dumb and dreadful torment in those flaming fiery eyes.

Now she remembered them again. The eyes of Nicholas had brought them back to her mind. But his did not glare: they smouldered.

'Still, he is not at all like a cat in a trap,' she said to herself. 'No one could be less so.'

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It would have surprised Nicholas to know that he was thus in Alethea's thoughts, for in the first few weeks of their acquaintance, he hardly ever thought of her. His mind could only hold one thing at a time, and just then he was thinking of Brokeyates. In fact, his real reason for coming to Radway on Sundays was that when the foreman was away, he felt obliged to go on talking about the work to someone else, and he used the Colonel as his safety valve.

But in course of time, he found himself wanting to show the house to a new admirer. He had now owned the place for five months and he was proud of what had been done in the time. It was October, and the Park was at its loveliest. In those misty autumn mornings, the house, in its new dignity, stood clear against a gorgeous pageant of colour. The beeches upon the hillside behind it, had the splendour of some old historic battle—a mellay of crimson and scarlet seen through a haze of smoke. The willows which hung over the lake, were each a little golden waterfall, and in the foreground there stood a glorious group of Scotch firs, their stems freed at last from the tangle of elder bushes and seedling sycamores which had hidden them. Now they glowed like red amber in the oblique rays of the sun. Brokeyates was no longer a ruin lost in a thicket. It stood revealed, a noble house in a noble Park.

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A very pretty low wall edged the flower garden to the south of the house, and this had been entirely out of sight when Nicholas came to the place. The men found it when they cleared away the masses of untidy greenery which had grown up about it; and then, overthrown on the ground beside it, they had discovered the fragments of a row of exquisitely carved stone urns. Only one was intact: the others had been completely broken to bits. Nicholas had restored the wall, and he employed the best sculptor he could find to furnish it once more with its row of urns. For some reason that garden wall meant almost more to him than anything he had done. That forgotten fragment of buried formality symbolized for him something which could never have been found in Australia. It was such a trifle to have made so exquisite. It was so unimportant beside the house. Yet, in those autumn mornings, when he stood in the Park and looked towards the house, that little wall seemed to pull the landscape together, giving to the picture its complete and ultimate proportion.

Nicholas spoke of this when he was lunching at Radway one Sunday, and Colonel Bracton said he had quite forgotten the existence of the wall. 'Although,' he added, 'it must have been there in the old days.'

'I have always loved it,' said Alethea, 'although I have never seen it properly. But I have often

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climbed in among the bushes and tried to piece those broken urns together. And one summer, I cleared quite a lot of the wall, but it was soon choked up again.'

Nicholas looked at her with interest.

'Do you often come into the Park?' he asked. 'I have never seen you there.'

'Not now. But in those years when Sir Henry was in bed, I used to think that if I didn't enjoy it, nobody would, and I walked there every day.'

'Come and see it again,' Nicholas said eagerly. 'You won't know the place.'

'I should love to.'

'Perhaps you will think I have tidied away all the romance.'

'It certainly had a romantic look of lovely misery, but it really was getting too bad. Simply dreary and desolate. Brokeyates is so beautiful that it must always be romantic, even without being a ruin.'

'Come to-morrow morning and let me show you everything.'

'I will.'

And so it was Alethea's figure which first brought life for Nicholas into his empty house. It was with a thrill that he saw her move down the picture gallery, silhouetted against the window at its end. The library became a new place for him when she sat down in an enormous chair of

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Spanish leather, the light youth of her head clear against a row of ancient books behind it. He watched her on the staircase, as she stopped with one hand on the banister, and tilted her head at a funny little angle, so as to catch a view of the summer house through the open door. It could only be seen from just that one point. Nicholas couldn't think why he had noticed her so little at Radway. Here she seemed to catch every ray of light which came through the windows. The sun moved with her, lighting her girlish figure even when she stood in a shadow.

Alethea suited the house. She was one of the uncommon people who can make an 'old-fashioned' appearance distinguished instead of dowdy. This was because her clothes were not old-fashioned at all. It was her type of face, and the way her head was set upon her rippling shoulders, that were so entirely mid-Victorian. She belonged to the crinoline era. Her clothes hung in the same slim, flowing lines as did those of the other girls of her day, and yet she moved in a billowy manner which suggested a hoop. Her hair, parted in the middle, lay close against her head; and she wore ear-rings, a fashion which was then restricted to ladies of a certain age. She might have stepped out of the age of primness; but not the least of her charms lay in the fact that she certainly *had* stepped out of it. Primness means

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the perpetual memory that there are certain things which, *as* young ladies, young ladies are not expected to do or to say. Alethea was entirely spontaneous. She spoke, without remembering that it was she who spoke. She acted, forgetting herself in what she did.

And now, she said nothing which might have been expected of her. She gave no conventional praise to the tasteful manner in which the changes in the house had been carried out, but she gave Nicholas the impression that she felt just as he did about the place. In his own mind, his task had been merely to release the beauty and character which had lain there all along, imprisoned in the tumble-down house. He hated the idea that people might think he had come from Australia, with no instinct for the past of an old English house, to make his inheritance into a smart new place. He liked to feel that he had created nothing, that he had only let in the light upon what was already there. And Alethea too appeared to see the beauty of Brokeyates as a freed captive. She spoke as if she had known her to have been there all along. And now she rejoiced in her loveliness, without reminding her of the fetters which she had shaken off.

And how sensitive she was! Although she did not crudely say, 'How well you have done that!' or 'What an improvement you have made there!'

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yet Nicholas knew that she saw everything that he wanted her to see. She never missed the charm of a vista seen through a door which he had purposely left open so that that charming vista might appear. She saw when the light fell upon a picture which he had set in that particular spot only in order that it might catch just that very gleam. But when she saw these things, like Nicholas himself, she did not praise the workman, she admired the thing done.

Nicholas found himself loving Brokeyates more than ever before. He found a subtle flattery in Alethea's way of taking all that he had done to the place as though it had been a natural growth. She seemed to identify him with his house. He was assured that he really did belong there. Australia became a very long way off.

One o'clock came, and he asked her to stay for luncheon, although with an inward uneasiness as to the meal which might be served by Mrs. Dybbe. Alethea however did not put it to the test. She said that her grandfather would expect her, and she ran swiftly away across the Park.

'Is that the governor's young lady?' asked one of the London workmen, as he saw her go.

'His young lady? Bless me, no. That's Bracton's maid, from over the way,' replied the old mason who lived in the village at the gate.

CHAPTER IV

ARTHUR FANSHAW was an oldish young man of about twenty-six, rich, and rather stupid. He had never been young, but had passed direct from babyhood to middle-age, carrying with him the fat, round, milky face of the first, as his vehicle to express the precise self-satisfaction of the second. He possessed a fine place about five miles from Brokeyates, and here he lived in solid comfort, coddled by his mother, and laying down the law to her. He little knew that, emphatically as he laid it down, it was she who legislated; for the axioms which he declaimed so pompously, had all, in the first place, originated with her. He had made up his mind that Alethea was to be his wife, and so of course had Mrs. Fanshawe. The idea had in fact come from her, like everything else in the house which might be dignified by the name of an idea. The mother and son were further agreed that there need be no hurry about the wedding. Alethea could well wait a few years. Her grandfather needed her; and, too, Mrs. Fanshawe was in no hurry to make way for another mistress of the house, however suitable. More-

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over, as she told her son, it is a mistake for girls to marry too young. They have more sense after they have reached twenty-five. It was tacitly agreed between the Fanshaws that Arthur should wait to propose till Colonel Bracton died. Then it would be a graceful act on his part, and very consoling to Alethea.

Alethea never guessed at these intentions. Had she done so, she would have disliked Arthur even more than she did. Her feeling for him now was merely a somewhat bored indifference: but if she had thought of him as a possible husband, she would have hated him actively.

They generally met out hunting once or twice in the week during the winter, and they always said a few words to one another at the Meet. Later in the day, they saw little of each other, as Arthur was always too busy looking for gates to be able to attend to anything else.

Mrs. Fanshawe often drove her phaeton to the Meet, and she sometimes followed the hounds for a short time, watching the hunt from the road. Then she would keep a watch on Alethea, to make sure that the girl remained loyal to her undeclared admirer, and accepted no attentions from other young men. Flirtations in the hunting field are only too common, and Arthur Fanshawe's wife must be above suspicion, not only after marriage, but before it had even been contemplated by her.

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Alethea was unaware of this supervision; and the fact that she went her way so gaily, and yet succeeded in retaining Mrs. Fanshawe's approval, suggested that the young men who went out with the hounds were not quick to appreciate beauty.

Sir Nicholas Roxerby had not been out many times, before Mrs. Fanshawe perceived that he and Alethea seemed to have a good deal to say to each other, for they exchanged words one day at least three times before the hounds moved off. She suspected she knew not what; and then, from her point of vantage on the high road she observed that their two horses were close beside each other while the first covert was being drawn. She remarked on this to her son when they were having tea together that afternoon, saying that she hoped Alethea was not going to allow herself to be talked about. Arthur had, of course, observed nothing, but he was sure that his mother was right. He felt, creeping beneath his skin, a rather sluggish dislike for this new neighbour. The fellow obviously deserved a snub.

'I suppose they hunt on cart-horses in Australia,' he therefore remarked to Alethea the next week, when Nicholas was seen arriving at the Meet, mounted on a very big horse.

'Cart-horses? Why?'

'Well, look at that clumsy brute.'

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It was not quite clear whether he was speaking of the horse or of its rider.

'He's a big man, and he wants a big horse,' said Alethea. 'He is altogether on the grand scale, don't you think so?' she continued, saying this to tease Arthur, for she saw that he was cross.

He rose to her bait.

'Not very grand. He looks to me like a burglar from Botany Bay.'

Alethea laughed. She refused to take the argument seriously.

'And you think they ride upon cart-horses,' she said. 'I wonder if they do.'

She moved off, not particularly interested.

Nicholas had overheard Arthur's last speech, as it had been intended that he should. It was spoken in no subdued tones.

His features were immovable, but there was a dark flush on his face, and he marked down Arthur Fanshawe as an enemy. He was hurt with Alethea too, for he had seen her laugh.

So Mrs. Fanshawe, spying from her phaeton, was not that day annoyed by seeing those two horses together.

Nicholas rode furiously, and so close upon the hounds that he was sworn at by the master.

If Alethea had been near at that moment, she would again have been reminded of the trapped cat, for Nicholas's eyes glared in their deep sockets,

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as those other eyes had glared from the shadow of the wood. He made up his mind that the members of the hunt were conspiring together to treat him as an outsider, and he imagined himself surrounded by latent enmity. He did not stay out long, but he trotted his horse back before luncheon, and round a corner in a lane near Brokeyates, he overtook Alethea, also riding slowly home.

He did not want to see her, for at that moment he felt against all the world, but she turned and greeted him with a friendliness which was quite unembarrassed. In spite of this, Nicholas could not forget that she had laughed about Botany Bay.

His first impulse was to ride by with only a curt greeting, and then he changed his mind. He decided to let her know that he had overheard her conversation with Arthur Fanshawe.

'So you were amused by Mr. Fanshawe's jokes,' he said fiercely.

She was honestly mystified.

'His jokes? Has he made any?'

'You know what I mean. You and he seem to agree that Botany Bay is an immensely funny subject.'

Alethea was very much distressed. Arthur's remark had not amused her at all. She had thought it stupid and tasteless. And now it was exasperating to find herself credited with having joined in the laughter of fools. Nothing is more

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humiliating. And then she looked at Nicholas, and she realized that to him the thing was more than a mere trivial annoyance. She saw that he was deeply wounded. When she met his unhappy eyes she felt as if she had joined in throwing stones at a helpless creature. This strong-looking man was curiously vulnerable. It was perhaps ridiculous of him, but Alethea felt nothing but contrition. She blushed for her behaviour towards a newcomer.

'Botany Bay?' she said. 'What must you have thought of us? Do please forgive me for behaving so that you could even imagine that I was being so impertinent. For, honestly, I wasn't. What did make me laugh was to find that there was anyone left in these days who could still think of Australia in terms of Botany Bay. It shows that we are at least a hundred years behind the times. *You* ought to be laughing at us. Don't you feel that our hunt dates back to the days of Leech and Caldecott?'

Alethea was so sorry that Nicholas should have been wounded, that her expression as she spoke was wonderfully charming. She called upon him to smile with her at the follies of the country-side, and it struck him that it was a very winning smile which he was invited to share. She looked entirely beguiling. His ill temper slipped away from him. He smiled back.

By this time they had reached the white wooden

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gate which led to Radway, and Alethea prepared to turn in. Then she felt that after what had happened, Nicholas needed some special gesture of friendship and she looked back.

'Come in and have some luncheon,' she said.

'Isn't it too late?'

'No. It's only two o'clock, and I always get back about this time on Tuesdays if I can, because grandfather is late after going to the Bench. He will be so glad to see you.'

When they reached the house the Colonel had not yet come in, and the two sat down to luncheon together. Alethea took the cover off the dish at the end of the table and disclosed a couple of roast ducks. She gave Nicholas a despairing look. Colonel Bracton considered the business of carving at a meal to be one of those sacred rites which devolve upon the head of the family in his capacity of High Priest of the Household. No one but himself might touch the sacred carving knife. Alethea was therefore the most inexperienced of carvers, and roast ducks were altogether beyond her.

'Do you think you could possibly get anything off these creatures?' she asked Nicholas.

He was amazed. He had always looked upon Alethea as extremely capable, and he was proud to find that she expected him to be her master in this domestic art.

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'I expect I can hack something off,' he said, taking the carvers.

'*Hack?*' she exclaimed. 'What in the world are you going to do? Please be careful.'

'That's only a figure of speech,' he said, tapping one of the ducks with the knife. It gave out a hard and hollow sound.

'There seems to be very little on it,' he said uneasily.

Alethea laughed with delight.

'You are no better at it than I am,' she said. 'I know there's plenty there. They were very fat before they were cooked. But ducks are the most difficult things in the world to carve. How helpless we both are!'

She spoke as if this were a virtue on their parts.

'We shall have to tear the brutes limb from limb,' he said.

She gasped.

'Grandfather will never forgive us if they don't look right,' she said.

Nicholas had never thought of carving as one of the fine arts.

'Does it matter what they look like?'

'It matters far more than whether we get anything to eat.'

He thought how his Australian friends would mock at a world where the manner of eating was of more importance than the eating; and he

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joyously realized, as he did a dozen times a day, that he lived in England.

'Then what can we do?' he asked.

'Starve, in sight of plenty,' she answered dramatically.

'We shall have to go to Brokeyates for luncheon after all,' he said.

'No. We will ring for Kate.'

They did so, and the parlourmaid appeared.

But she too was no carver. The presence of an expert in the house had paralysed the powers of all amateurs.

'Perhaps cook could manage it,' she suggested.

Cook was sent for, and Nicholas enjoyed the sight of the household assembling round the unconquerable ducks.

Cook was a courageous woman. She knew how to make a salmi, and so she had ideas as to the situations of the joints of birds. Fearlessly she took the carvers in hand, the others crowding round to watch her gallant adventure.

And then the door opened, and Colonel Bracton came in.

'What in the world is going on?' he asked.

'Sir Nicholas has come to luncheon and no one can carve the ducks,' Alethea explained.

'So you had to send for the household,' said the old man, chuckling as he came to the table. 'Well, well, it isn't everyone nowadays who knows how

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to take a bird to pieces. I'm glad to see that not much harm has been done as yet.' And in two minutes he had divided one of the ducks most delicately into artistic joints, had given each one of the party a large helping, and yet seemed to have left most of the duck undisturbed on the dish.

At home, Nicholas would have resented being treated as an incapable child, in company with a young lady, a parlourmaid, and a cook; but here he found himself enjoying the experience. He was not used to seeing elderly gentlemen supreme in their own houses, for he had come from a land where the younger generation had already taken command; and yet he couldn't help being amused to find that he and Alethea were treated as two children, as they were handed their portions by the head of the house. They exchanged surreptitious glances of understanding over their narrow escape from disgrace by nearly having made a hash of the roast duck.

Colonel Bracton took advantage of the episode to entertain them with stories of his prowess as carver at many a Tithe dinner. Such reminiscences recalled a society which seemed to Nicholas as remote as the middle ages. A young Englishman would have found the Colonel rather a bore, but Nicholas absorbed every word. He looked upon this as part of his initiation into the life which his grandfather had lived; and though it seemed to

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concern itself with trifles, yet he felt for some reason that he was being made a citizen of no mean city.

The Colonel always had a sleep after luncheon on Petty Session days, and as he looked upon Nicholas to-day as being Alethea's guest, he made no exception to his rule. He therefore retired to his study, a room containing no books, but full of a medley of guns and fishing tackle, and he left the other two alone.

It was an intimate hour or two, for Alethea seemed ready quite naturally to allow her guest to share in her everyday avocations. She did not treat him as a stranger. They went first to the stable, to see that the stable boy had given a rub-down to Alethea's hunter. This boy was the only servant employed by Colonel Bracton in his stables, and Alethea could not have hunted at all unless she had made herself, to a certain extent, responsible for the care of her own horse.

They then walked to the village to call for the letters and newspapers before the Colonel woke up to ask for his *Times*. He was still asleep when they got back, so Alethea took up her embroidery and put in a few stitches, while Nicholas read her scraps of the news.

He found this natural easy companionship extremely pleasant. It was his first experience of English home life.

Then Alethea found a bag of chestnuts, and with

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great delight they began to roast them in the wood ashes of the hall fireplace. While they were doing this, the sound of hoofs was heard on the gravel outside.

'Heavens! A caller!' Alethea exclaimed, and she peered through the window. 'It is Mr. Fanshawe. Let us escape.' And before Nicholas could collect his wits, he found himself creeping along behind Alethea, both bent double, so as not to be seen through the window, and escaping through the door which led to the servants' quarters.

They met Kate on her way to answer the bell.

'The Colonel is asleep, and I have gone out,' Alethea said, as they passed her. And to save the maid from perjuring herself, she led the way out into the garden.

Nicholas found that his annoyance of the morning had completely vanished. He realized that Arthur Fanshawe did not count, unless one was prepared to allow that he was worth counting.

CHAPTER V

ARTHUR FANSHAW had recognized Sir Nicholas's horse in the stable-yard as he rode up to the door, and the sight did not please him. His mortification was increased when he was informed that Alethea was not at home. He felt sure that this was untrue. He had fancied that he heard voices in the hall before he rang the bell, and his ring had certainly been succeeded by that superlative silence which follows upon talk suddenly cut short.

He rode home, resolving that 'something must be done'. He could not decide what it should be, but his mother soon made that clear. She pointed out that it was ridiculous to think of his waiting indefinitely for Colonel Bracton to die: the old man might live to be a hundred. Meanwhile, Alethea would soon be 'talked about', an impossible position for any modest woman. She was one of the few girls in the neighbourhood who had been properly brought up, her grandfather having trained her to respect her elders, and not to choose her own way. It would be disastrous were this paragon to fall under the influence of a young man

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from the Colonies. Alethea must be married at once, but she must first be given a sharp reprimand.

Arthur was very much irritated with Alethea, and he had never less desired her as a wife. But he wanted to give her a snub, and he had an instinctive feeling that she would never take one from him until she was in such a position that she could not resent it. Marriage appeared to be the only possible course. To engage himself to Alethea would also put Sir Nicholas very decidedly into his place. Arthur did not care for the idea of proposing, but he made up his mind to do it the following day. It was not a hunting day, and so he would have time to spare.

And that same evening, sitting in the library at Brokeyates, his eyes rather drearily passing over the somewhat forbidding backs of the rows of unopened books, Nicholas too was thinking of marriage. The afternoon at Radway had brought home to him the loneliness of his life. He thought of the past. He could not remember his father, and his mother and he had always hated each other. In Australia, he had always known himself an alien, and here in England he was finding it impossible to make friends. Once again he lived through the events of the morning—Arthur Fanshawe's insulting tones, the impatient rebuff given to him by the master. And as he mentally recoiled once more beneath the sting of these memories,

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there rose before his eyes a very different picture. He saw Alethea's deep brown hair, as it had caught the light when she had sat for a moment in that very chair which now faced him, empty. He remembered the oval face with its dark blue eyes, and the rounded throat. That throat of hers! How lovely it was! And yet it was the kind of throat which seemed unaccountably to have gone out of fashion since the days when Queen Victoria was a girl.

He knew that when she came to Brokeyates that morning, he had watched her as if she were some re-incarnated spirit, someone who belonged to the place, and who had always belonged there, but yet who was altogether out of his reach. That visit had been so short, and when it was over, it had become dreamlike, and Alethea herself had seemed magical and unreal. Now he possessed a new memory of her—the memory of to-day. This was the same girl, although he could scarcely believe it. That friendly natural creature who had not known how to carve a duck, who escaped from Arthur Fanshawe by the back door—this was the Alethea who had left in his library the image of that lovely fleeting ghost. The two impressions swam together, making a new being.

Till now, Nicholas had never contemplated the idea of marrying. As long as he lived in Melbourne, there had been a bar between him and

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the girls he had known—a bar set up by a sense of inferiority and kept in position by a sense of pride. And his life with his mother had not led him to consider the presence of a woman as something to be desired in a house. Then he came to England, and at first, Brokeyates had filled his life. He had had no time for anything else. Now, his home was ready, beautiful and empty. He sat in it alone. And as he sat there, there swept over him the certainty that all the ways of his life had converged upon this one point—‘the time and the place and the loved one’ were at last coming together.

So it came about that Alethea, who had lived to the age of twenty-three without having a proposal, now had two in one day.

Arthur Fanshawe came first.

Alethea went that morning for her usual walk to the village, to fetch the newspapers and to exercise the dogs, and when she came back she found Arthur waiting for her in the drive. She thought at once that he looked ominous. ‘Solemn, determined, and rather cross,’ was how she summed him up, and she guessed at once that he had known that she was at home the day before.

Arthur did not move when he saw her approaching. He stood with his arm through his horse’s bridle, tapping his gaiters with his hunting crop, and he awaited her, like a monarch.

She felt amused and rather defiant. She thought

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it like Arthur to make a formal visit in order to inform her that he was aware that he had been snubbed. Most people would wish to appear unconscious of it.

She came towards him with her most friendly smile.

'Mr. Fanshawe, don't tell me that you have been standing here ever since the bell rang yesterday afternoon! I bolted into the garden when I heard a caller, and they told me afterwards that it was you. You know how panic seizes one at the sound of the door bell.'

'Didn't you know who it was, when you ran away?'

'Why do you ask me that?'

She thought it unbelievably clumsy of him.

'Because I want to know.'

'O, well. Yes. I did.'

'Then I think it was beastly unfriendly of you.'

This was so disarming that she had to laugh.

'Yes it was. I agree. Please forgive me. But you know how, when the bell rings, one is always seized by an irresistible impulse to fly.'

'I don't think I do,' said Arthur, who seldom felt an irresistible impulse.

'How terrible! Then you have no sympathy with my weakness.'

'Sympathy? Perhaps not. But great concern. Very great concern.'

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She could not follow the subtle distinction.

'I am sorry you should be so very much concerned,' she said lightly. 'Please don't be.'

'I am,' he replied gravely. 'Very much concerned over anything which concerns you. Do not imagine that I am thinking of my own feelings. It was not at all that I minded your refusing to see me. Although, of course, I did mind that too,' he added quickly, feeling that he had not said quite what he meant to say.

Alethea waited, curious to know what then it could be which had so concerned him.

'It was not my personal feelings which were wounded,' he went on; 'wounded though they well might have been.'

('That was well put,' he thought. 'I have not surrendered my dignity by admitting that my feelings were hurt: I have merely pointed out that her conduct was sufficient to hurt them.')

'What pained me', he said aloud, 'was to find you acting like a silly girl.'

'Like a silly girl? That is a matter of opinion,' Alethea here interjected.

He silenced her with his hand. It was the gesture of a schoolmaster.

'Of course you are aware', he said, 'that your conduct concerns me very nearly. I have, in my mind, long set you in a position which compels me to care most keenly how you behave. Your actions

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affect me, almost as though they were my own. You will understand, I am sure, what I mean.'

'I don't think I do,' said Alethea.

He looked at her, incredulous.

'We have known each other for some years,' he said, 'practically from childhood, and you must know that I admire you. Yes, Alethea, I admire you most sincerely. So much so that I have always hoped some day to persuade you to become my wife.'

'O, no,' said Alethea.

He smiled at her. It fell in with his conception of female modesty that a young lady should appear unconscious of her powers of attraction.

'What I have said will make it clear to you why I cannot tolerate in you the foibles and follies which I expect to find in other girls. You must not fall below the ideal which I have created for you.'

'Cæsar's wife,' she said with a touch of irony. 'But then, you are not Cæsar, nor am I your wife.'

He missed the allusion, and thought she was speaking at random, confused by the vista opening before her.

'Yes Alethea, we are made for each other,' he said, and in his own ears he sounded astonishingly lyrical. 'Neighbours we have long been, and now the time has come for us to be still nearer. I had

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thought to wait to speak of this, until your duty to your grandfather had been completely done. I had thought that perhaps you ought not to leave him before his death; but now . . .'

Alethea insisting upon interrupting the flow of his eloquence.

'Please leave me to my duty,' was what she curtly said.

'No, Alethea. I have carefully thought the matter out. Your grandfather's old servants will make him quite as comfortable as you have done, and you will be near enough to go to see him every day. He would die with an easier mind if he left you well established.'

'Do let me speak,' she said. 'I am not in love with you. I cannot marry you.'

He gave her an indulgent smile.

'Child,' he said. 'How can you know the meaning of love? That is what your husband will teach you.'

'Thank you. I'd rather learn it for myself.'

For a moment these words really shocked Arthur. Then he assured himself that Alethea could not know their import.

'You will learn soon enough,' he answered kindly. 'We now love each other as much as people ever do before marriage. Come dear, we will go into the house, and I will tell the Colonel of our conversation.'

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'There's nothing to tell him.' Alethea insisted. 'I have already said that I cannot marry you, and there is the end of it.'

There was so much decision in her voice that he was obliged to turn back, his hand on the handle of the door.

'But Alethea, you must have known that this has always been my intention, my hope.'

She shook her head.

'Indeed I never thought of it.'

'You *have* known it,' he exclaimed impatiently. 'You must have known it all along. But something has lately happened to unsettle you.'

Irritation was rising within him. She too began to feel angry.

'I am not at all unsettled,' she answered coldly. 'But to leave grandfather would unsettle me very much.'

'You are not thinking of your grandfather, and you know it,' he said sharply. 'Listen Alethea. I see that you know that you have been behaving badly. You have allowed your name to be coupled with that of this Australian at Brokeyates. It is only too true. You have been talked about, and in a very short time, you will find that you have definitely lost caste in the neighbourhood. I am here to show you that I am ready to save you from the consequences of your own thoughtlessness. When you are my wife, or even my *fiancée*,

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no one will dare to speak slightly of you. Understand Alethea that I care for you enough to propose to you even at this moment, when many a fellow would fight shy of you. If I stand by you, and I am here to tell you that I will, your reputation will be recovered.'

Alethea was astounded at this tirade; and so, to be honest, was Arthur himself. When he started for Radway, he had not thought out what his suspicions of Nicholas and Alethea amounted to, and he certainly had never heard their names coupled together except by his mother.

'I imagine that your motives are kind,' said Alethea, almost choking with rage, 'though your words sound most insulting. I suppose you don't understand what you are saying. But try, at least to understand what *I* say. I will speak very clearly once for all. *I cannot marry you.* Don't trouble grandfather. There is nothing to be said to him about this.'

'I had better see him. Marriage is, after all, an affair concerning the family more than the individual.'

'No marriage can take place without the consent of the individual whom you so much despise,' said Alethea. 'And let me tell you once more that my consent will never be given. I appreciate the honour of your proposal, and I decline it.'

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She walked into the house, and shut the door, leaving him outside.

Arthur put his hand on the bell, and then decided not to ring it. He was very angry, although he was none the less bent on marrying the girl who had angered him. But he did feel at the moment that he did not want to see her again. He made up his mind to consult his mother, and having arrived at this soothing solution of the problem of the moment, he got upon his horse and rode away.

CHAPTER VI

ALTHEA stood in the hall, listening to the sound of the horse's hoofs growing gradually fainter; and as the sound faded, she grew more and more angry. The conversation had taken her so completely by surprise that, at the time, she had not realized its implications. Thinking it over, she became furious. The gong sounded and, instead of going in to luncheon, she ran upstairs to her room, and stood looking at herself in the glass. She saw that she was shaking.

'How absurd of me to mind,' she thought. 'He isn't in my life at all, so what does he matter?'

She felt calmer when she had sponged her face vigorously with cold water, and when she joined her grandfather in the dining-room, she said nothing to him of Arthur's visit. As the meal went on, she even began to see this absurd proposal as nothing but a joke. She decided that she need not worry as to whether or not she had hurt Arthur's feelings, for obviously he had no feelings to hurt. He had shown himself once more as the ridiculously pompous young man she had always thought him, and it was certainly good for him

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to find out that he was less important than he imagined.

After her usual afternoon's walk with the Colonel she almost felt that the absurd scene in the drive had not really happened. It became like an episode in a play seen a very long time ago.

But she once again recalled it, and with unpleasant vividness, that evening after tea, when a visitor was announced and Nicholas was shown into her sitting-room. To her annoyance, she felt that she blushed, and then she knew that the impertinent things which Arthur had said to her in the morning had made her ill at ease.

At any rate she found herself more consciously critical of both young men, and as she was shaking hands, she decided that both were egoists.

'The difference between them is', she thought, 'that Arthur Fanshawe is conceited and Sir Nicholas is proud.'

She made up her mind that this was why it was so far easier to hurt the feelings of Nicholas; for proud people are immensely sensitive, while there is no one more thick-skinned than the really conceited man.

These thoughts made her kindly disposed towards Nicholas, and she became the more so when she saw that he was obviously shy when he arrived. He seemed to think that an apology was necessary for his appearing so soon again.

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'I hope I am not interrupting you,' he said, with what she described to herself as an air of arrogant diffidence. 'Are you very busy?'

'Not at all. I never am,' said Alethea gaily.

'I wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed being here yesterday,' Nicholas said, rather lamely, evidently uncertain as to what he *had* come to say.

'That's very nice of you, particularly as it was touch and go whether you would get anything at all to eat. I am still blushing over my failure as a carver. And yours too,' she added.

'O. . . . All that. . . . That's exactly what I mean. You made me feel that I belonged, and you can't guess what that is to me. I never seem to have had a family to belong to.'

'You have a mother haven't you?'

'Yes, yes. Of course. But. . . . I think perhaps we don't have family life in Australia in the same way that you have it here. Everything is so different.'

'Tell me about your mother.'

'There's not much to tell, and anyhow I don't suppose it would interest you.'

'Of course it would. How can two people be friends till they know something about each other?'

'Well, I suppose that my mother and I just don't get on. I don't want to pose as if there was any-

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thing very unique about that. But I have never felt as if I really was any relation at all to her, and we certainly don't understand each other. We are so completely unlike.'

'Yet I expect you miss her now, don't you?'

'Miss her? Brokeyates is already far more to me than she has ever been,' he broke out, with a sort of subdued vehemence.

She looked at him, rather wondering.

'How curious that is,' she said. 'Fond as I am of places, no place could ever for me take the place of a person. It would always appeal to another part of me altogether. Quite a real part, but I think a less ardent one.'

'Perhaps so. And perhaps that part of me—the ardent part—has not been touched till now.'

'That sounds very sad.'

'So I begin to think, but till yesterday I never realized what I was missing. Do you know that I have never felt quite natural with anybody before?'

'I wonder why,' she said, interested.

'I believe it all began at a horrible school that I went to when I was eight. The boys were little brutes. They taught me . . . they taught me . . . what grown-up people are really like, too. People don't change you know, but as life goes on they learn to hide the spitefulness of their natures under a cloak of good manners.'

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'You are very hard on the human race.'

'I can't help it. You will say I am a self-conscious fool, but ever since those days at school, I have never got free of the idea that people are looking down on me.'

'What nonsense! Why should they? For one thing, they can't, physically. You are much too tall.'

She wanted to treat his gloomy mood as lightly as she could, but she saw that her lightness seemed to hurt him. He flinched.

'Oh! Physically! Do you think *that* counts for so much? Why should it?'

'It doesn't, of course. But you always give the impression of towering spiritually too. Confess that you look down on the world, far more than the world looks down on you.'

She looked up at him and smiled, as he stood rather fiercely above her. She wanted so much to make him feel happy, and he seemed so determined that the world was against him.

'I don't want to tower. All I ask is to find myself on a level with other people. I want to be intimate, to be easy, to share my thoughts with someone else. What fun it must be to belong to a really big family?'

'Mustn't it! I have never had that either. I have always been alone with grandfather, and much as I love him, he is a good deal older than I am. I find that age towers over youth, you

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know. You are not the only one to feel small.'

She said this so drolly, that he was obliged to laugh with her.

'But your grandfather is a wonderful man, isn't he? I have never felt small with him. He makes everything seem valuable. Every stone of Broke-yates is more than simply a stone for him. That's why he means England to me—the accumulated character that one finds in things. Something you can never get in a new country.'

'I believe you see it more than we do, perhaps more than is really there.'

'More, I suppose, than is actually there at any one moment. But what I love in England is that the one moment is such a fraction of the whole. Everything here has a past and a future.'

'I like to hear you say that. I thought a man from such a huge country as Australia would find England small and cramping.'

'Small? Cramping? Why, till I got to Broke-yates, I had never known what it meant to stretch myself. Perhaps it is in time, rather than in space, that England is so big. Everyone's life must be longer here, because you can look both ways, while in the new country you can only look one way—forward.'

'Isn't that what the moderns like, all the world over?'

'If they say so here, it is because they are safe

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with their past behind them. I have always longed to look back, but I couldn't—over there.'

His voice took a lower pitch. He stopped, looking moodily before him.

'Your parents were perhaps unhappy together,' she hazarded.

'I should think they must have been. My father must have known he had made a mistake. How I have always longed to be back in the world which would have been his if he . . . hadn't met my mother!'

She saw that the bitterness in him must have arisen from some very early memories.

'And now you are here, in time to save Broke-yates, and finding the place wanting you so badly. But for you, I believe it would have fallen down by now.'

His face lit.

'Yes. At last it seems worth while to build and to plant for the future. I can look forward here, because I'm not ashamed to look back. Life is a far bigger thing than I knew. A great gift.'

She wondered, as she saw in him that enthusiasm which had so impressed Mr. Briscowe. An unexpected light had swept across the sombre haughty face.

'A great gift,' she repeated. 'I wonder what you will do with it.'

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She spoke half to herself. He seemed to her at that moment to be a man of infinite possibilities.

'It depends on you.'

'On me?'

'Yes.'

He moved a step nearer her, and paused. The monosyllable hung in the air between them. She did not ask him what he meant. She knew; and to affect ignorance would have seemed to her a poor form of coquetry. So she said nothing.

'I want you in my life,' he said. 'I have always been such a failure alone.'

She shook her head at that.

'Not after what you are making of Brokeyates.'

'Yes, I do begin to feel that life is a marvel, and at first I couldn't tell whether the marvel came from you or from Brokeyates. Now I know it is you *in* Brokeyates. The day you came there, I saw it was *your* place. You belong there. And when I think of you there, I can't tell you what I feel. Such a sense of opening, of escape, of freedom, of happiness, of big things to be done. And when I try to get down to the meaning of it all, it all comes back to you. You hold the key. Will you take it, and open the door for me to live?'

The vibration in his voice shook her. It was like a physical contact.

'I think I am only a symbol for you,' she said.

'Yes. You are a symbol, and that means that you

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are more than a woman. You are my love. You are the impossible become possible. Alethea, tell me that it *is* possible!

His last words were a cry. He had taken a quick step, and now he stood close above her, his great height dominating her. The dark face had lost its discontent. The smouldering eyes were lit. She was carried along by his impetus.

'I wonder what we should do together,' she said.

'Then it *will* be together?'

He had not asked her to marry him, nor did he now wait for a reply. They both felt that this new relationship had always been latent in their friendship.

'A new life in the old country,' he said. 'And what a life it's going to be!'

'I believe it is,' she answered dizzily.

And then she felt as if some great eagle had swooped down upon her. His arms held her, and she seemed to be carried away on swift wings. Could this indeed be the room in which she had sat, evening after evening, living her quiet uneventful life? Nothing was the same. She looked back upon the world. It was unrecognizable. This indeed was love.

CHAPTER VII

THEY were married in the early summer, knowing at the time as much and as little of each other as do most brides and bridegrooms. Marriage must always be a gamble, but for most people it holds few surprises, because, as a rule, they have married in their own world. Consequently, what they discover in their partner is merely a fresh version of their own prejudices and conventions, and this is always pleasant. Nicholas and Alethea, however, had been attracted to each other by what each found unusual in the other, and, too, they had grown up on opposite sides of the world. They were destined therefore to find in their marriage elements more promising, and also more ominous, than do most people.

Like many other women, Alethea thought that she had fallen in love with Nicholas because she recognized in him her master; although, like most of her sex, what she really wanted was to be allowed to mother him. She had always seen in him something which asked for pity, in spite of his apparent pride; and in the very conversation which ended in their engagement, he had con-

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fessed himself a lonely and diffident man, distrustful of himself, and shy of other people.

Now she discovered that this was not at all to be his attitude. He had for a moment betrayed himself, because he was desperate to win her, and he would use any means to touch her heart; but when once they were married, Alethea found that there was nothing in the world which her husband disliked more than being pitied. It was true that he could not always hide from her that fundamental unhappiness which seemed to poison the roots of his nature, and which was so inexplicable. He had a lifelong quarrel with the world, but though he was always ready to resent its supposed enmity, he resented still more any obvious partisanship. Both offended him equally.

Alethea had married a very touchy man. As they travelled to Dover after their wedding, she was amazed to find how often he had been insulted during the day. Every congratulation appeared to have had for him a double edge.

'Your friends seem to think you have made a great mistake in marrying me,' he said, when they were settled in their carriage.

'I hope not,' she answered, smiling.

'You *hope* not? Then you are not very certain of it yourself?'

'Nicholas, don't be so silly. What do you want me to say?'

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'Something at any rate more emphatic than that you "hope" you haven't made a mistake.'

'Don't ask for so many compliments. Aren't you satisfied with the very big one I've paid you by marrying you? That's surely enough for one day.'

'So *that* is how your marriage strikes you—as a compliment to me.'

'Nicholas darling, you know what I feel about it, so don't tease me by pretending you don't. You will spoil our wonderful day, and I am being so happy.'

She gave him her hand with a quiet gesture of great tenderness.

Nicholas knew that he was being foolish. He put his arm round her, and he felt that while they were alone together, she would always be able to make everything right. But he could not help going on.

'Still darling, whatever *you* may feel about it, your friends showed me pretty clearly to-day that they don't agree with you.'

'What can you mean?'

'That old aunt of yours, for instance, Aunt Ethel, why did she say, "*Be kind to our darling. She is very precious to us all, and we shall not forgive you if you don't make her happy.*" Did she think I was going to beat you?'

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Alethea had to laugh.

'Evidently Nicholas, you have never had an aunt. Every aunt in England has said that at every wedding for the last thousand years.'

'And at least a dozen young men congratulated me, not on my *wife* but on my "*luck*"; as though nothing but an act of God could have got me married at all.'

'Do say that you think it *was* an act of God.'

'I may think so, and I do. But I object to other people telling me that *they* think so.'

'We must ignore other people,' said Alethea, 'and anyhow we can do so for the next month.'

Indeed it was a lesson which she did well to begin to learn on her wedding day, for when they came home to Brokeyates, Alethea soon found that it was almost impossible for Nicholas to make a new acquaintance without detecting somewhere a tendency to insult or to oppose him. The 'County' called, and Alethea soon found herself manœuvring with all the finesse she possessed, so that she might receive her callers alone, without Nicholas being in the room. If he was there, something was always said to offend him. Later on, when the hunting began, he absolutely refused to go out, because he said the master had insulted him. Alethea could not get him to tell her any more about the supposed insult, but she too gave up hunting, as she would not go out without her husband. It was the same

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with politics. Both Nicholas and Alethea had dreamt of his some day going into the House of Commons, and with this in view, she wanted him to take his part in politics in the constituency. But he was far too sensitive for the give and take of public life: he was always ready to quarrel at Committee meetings, not being able to understand that it was possible to disagree round the table in the Committee room, and to forget the whole controversy outside it. He had great political theories, and he and Alethea enjoyed discussing them together, but he very soon retired in a huff from any position which would have made it possible to put these theories into practice.

This withdrawal into a life alone together at Brokeyates was what they both enjoyed. There they were supremely happy, for they were in love not only with each other, but with the place. They shared many tastes, caring for the country, for the farm, for gardening, for riding. They spent months of rapture making a rock garden. Rose catalogues filled their evenings for weeks. Nicholas personally managed his Home Farm, with the help of a bailiff, and Alethea was as much interested in this as he was himself. Their lives were full of occupations, and they shared them all.

They did not always agree, but this gave zest to their intercourse. Alethea found her husband curiously different from herself in his relations

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with the people who lived in his cottages. He never made friends with them, and he really disliked his wife's doing so. He looked upon his workmen as 'hands', thinking that in their aspect of human beings, they were no concern of his. In fact he went further, and considered it an impertinence on the part of an employer to take an interest in the private affairs of his men. When Alethea hurried off to visit a woman who had had a baby, or a child who had been scalded, or a man with pneumonia, Nicholas told her that such visits were 'intrusions' on her part. When she went further, and gave practical help to people who were in trouble, he most emphatically said that she ought to respect their natural pride, and not to force her 'charity' upon them.

'We pay them well,' he said. 'They know what their wages are. We ought to respect their independence as we wish them to respect ours.'

'But I don't care whether they respect my independence or not,' Alethea would say. 'I want to like my neighbours and I want them to like me. I don't care about independence.'

Such differences of opinion seemed trifles in their lives, and yet they did indicate a very fundamental unlikeness in their whole outlook. Alethea had grown up in a world where it seemed inherent in the very nature of things that many of her neighbours were not sufficiently well off, to face

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unaided any unexpected demand on their resources. For country neighbours of all classes, an illness is the glad opportunity for friendship, and Alethea was delighted, on such an occasion, to hasten off with her soup, her pudding, or her bunch of grapes. She felt no sense of patronage: the people she visited had no uneasy sense of inferiority. In the village, everyone was ready to help the other, and that Alethea was able to give larger help than the rest was accepted as part of the original scheme of life. It was the manner of a world in which they had all grown up, and which had lasted for centuries before them: none of them realized that it was a regime which was passing away.

On the other hand, Nicholas had come from a country where such an attitude would have appeared intolerable. He himself would never have accepted a kindness from anyone who was his superior in wealth, and in a new country wealth alone creates superiority. He considered that the man who did him a kindness had done him an injury; and nothing irked him more than to feel he was 'under an obligation' to anyone.

They often argued over these differing points of view, and laughed over their disagreements. Alethea told Nicholas that his pride was abnormal and he teased her for being still more proud than he was, she so much enjoyed the position of Lady Bountiful. And having thus played with the sub-

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ject they each went their own way. Alethea really thought that her husband's idiosyncrasies had their advantage. It meant that life at Brokeyates was a perpetual honeymoon. They lived entirely apart from other people.

Six months after their marriage, Colonel Bracton died, and this was a very real grief to them both. Alethea adored her grandfather, who had always been a delightful companion to her, in spite of the two generations which might have divided them, if it had not been for the bridge of the old man's comprehension. And the Colonel was the only man whom Nicholas had never suspected of trying to patronize him. His was a friendship which could give and take on equal terms. During those first months, he had been at Brokeyates almost as much as in his own house. He entered into everything that was done or planned by Nicholas and Alethea. He was full of ideas, and could give very shrewd advice without being offended if it was not taken. He was indeed an ideal person with whom to talk things over, and his was a great loss, greater than they could know at the time.

But the shared sorrow brought them still nearer together. Alethea cried terribly; and Nicholas, while he tried to comfort her, did not disguise that he too needed comfort from her. Their mutual understanding went deeper than before.

And now their companionship entered upon a

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new phase. Alethea was going to have a baby, and for some months she felt desperately ill. She found it impossible to go on with the gardening and other outdoor occupations which she and Nicholas had shared; and she had to rest a great deal, returning to the embroidery which had taken so much of her time when she lived with her grandfather. This led them to new interests. Nicholas sat by her sofa and read aloud, and they found that books were far more interesting than they had known. It was a new discovery. Neither of them had lived among readers. Colonel Bracton only read *Country Life*, of which he had a complete set of bound volumes; and Nicholas at home had learnt from his mother that sensible people had something better to do than to swank about reading books. In fact there had been none at all in the Melbourne house, while at Brokeyates there was of course the usual country-house library, giving dignity to the walls, and consisting of a large number of books which were respected but not disturbed.

So nearly everything they read was new to them both, and they enjoyed together many books which most people would have read long ago. By a curious chance, they came upon *Richard Feverel*, and here they made acquaintance with the lady who read Blair's *Grave* over and over again to her unborn child, so that by the time he was four, he 'reelly was the piousest infant—he was like

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a little curate. His eyes was up. He talked so solemn.'

'My dear! We must be careful. What *do* we want him to be like?'

'Don Quixote I think,' said Nicholas, who had just been revelling in the book for the first time.

'I should like Philip Sidney,' said Alethea, 'but I have never read a life of him which gave the least idea of what he really was.'

'How can you tell what he was like then?'

'He is one of those people who are so immortal that they can't be killed by what is written about them.'

'Cynic that you are! What would the authors of the world say if they heard you? Who else do you know, in spite of the writers?'

'Moses. There's really very little about him in the Bible, and yet I know him too well for all the sermons in the world to persuade me that he was a prig.'

'Then you won't read sermons over the baby?'

'Please not,' said Althea, and they read none; but every book became more interesting when it evoked discussions as to whether this or that 'would shock the baby'.

And when she came; she created fresh discussions for she turned out to be a girl, so neither Philip Sidney nor Don Quixote could be her model.

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Alethea vowed that she saw traces of resemblance to the frightful Dulcinea.

At last they agreed to call her Portia, as from the first, she showed a determination to argue every point, and the *Merchant of Venice* had certainly been read over her at least once.

Alethea was quickly well, and life at Brokeyates became fuller and happier than ever. That summer was a very joyful time.

When Portia was about six months old, Nicholas received one morning a troublesome letter from Australia. Although he liked to feel that he had cut himself altogether away from life in Melbourne yet he was still a partner in his mother's business. She had seen to it that this fact should not interfere with her own powers as managing director, and hitherto his partnership had meant practically nothing. Now a new development was being planned, and it was essential that both partners should be on the spot for a short time. Nicholas was annoyed. He wanted nothing less than to go to Australia.

Alethea, on the other hand, was delighted when she heard the news.

'O Nicholas, how lovely!' she said. 'I have always longed to go to Australia, and do let us make a real journey round the world while we are about it. I have never been anywhere. This is a splendid opportunity.'

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'I couldn't think of taking you,' Nicholas replied.

'Not take me? But you *can't* go without me.'

'I'm afraid I must. Melbourne is not the place for you. You would hate Australia. And then, you can't leave Portia for so long.'

'Don't say that. She will miss me more when she is older, but now nurse is far better with her than I am.'

'You can't possibly leave your child—*our* child—to the tender mercies of servants while you go careering round the world.'

His tone was cold and crushing.

Alethea had tears in her eyes.

'Nicholas, you will be away six months. I can't be without you for so long.'

He melted towards her then, but he did not give in. He held her in his arms.

'Darling, I shall hate it much, *much* more than you do,' he said, with a dark fervour. 'It will mean going back, though only for a few weeks, to what I hoped I had left behind for ever. It will be misery to me.'

'Take me with you all the more,' she begged. 'If you are going to be unhappy, I must be there.'

'I should be more unhappy if you were.'

'But you don't know. You have forgotten that we can bear anything together, and nothing apart. Take me Nicholas, take me.'

'It's not only what *we* want,' he answered. 'Now

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we have got a child, we have to think of that first always. And then too, you might be going to have another, and you must remember how ill you were. If you were travelling in a country like Australia, you might permanently ruin the health of any child you were going to have.'

'Why should I? A sea voyage is the most restful thing in the world, and in Melbourne, I need do nothing that I don't want to do.'

'Melbourne is . . . a very bad place for children,' he said in decided tones.

'But you yourself were a child there,' she answered.

'So I know what I am talking about,' was his reply.

'Please don't leave me behind,' she begged once more.

'I must,' he said; and he did.

CHAPTER VIII

ALETHEA'S was a generous spirit, and, as Mrs. Fanshawe had long ago perceived, Colonel Bracton had taught her that in life one does not always get one's own way, though one does not mend matters by fretting over this truth. After her one passionate pleading, she did not therefore again refer to her desire to go with Nicholas to Australia. She saw that his mind was made up, and she did not wish to spoil their last days together by constant arguments. She made up her mind that they would make the most of every hour left to them, and although this made it even harder for Nicholas to leave her behind, he never flinched in his determination to do so.

'We won't make a tragedy of it,' he said. 'Think of soldiers and sailors. They have to leave their wives for much longer than this.'

'Poor things. I can't bear to think of them,' she said. 'Let us hope they don't love each other so much as we do.'

'Nobody can,' he said wildly, and almost with fury in his voice.

They said good-bye at the door of Brokeyates,

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and they both appeared to be quite gay over it. Alethea was so busy trying to make Portia wave her hand as the motor drove away, that her eyes were on the child, and not on her husband.

Nicholas was glad, for he knew that she was crying.

'I wish she didn't mind so much,' he said to himself, 'and I wish I didn't. It only means six months out of our lives, and I know I was right not to take her. Still I almost wish that I had refused to go at all. I daresay they could have done without me.'

A few weeks later Alethea found that she was going to have another child, and she knew that Nicholas would consider himself completely justified in having left her behind. For her own part, she was appalled at the prospect of these months without him, for she could not forget how ill she had been before Portia was born. She felt unutterably lonely, but she set her teeth and determined to be well, since it was for that reason that she had been left behind. And, much to her surprise, she found that she *was* well, in spite of her fears.

It was hard to fill up her time now that she was cut off from most of her activities. She and Nicholas had fallen out of the social life of the county, and she did not like to ask the old friends whom she had neglected since her marriage, to come and amuse her now. So she was thrown

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back upon herself. And then she found a real occupation.

The week before Nicholas left, he had engaged a new estate carpenter, who lived in a little house in the Park. Alethea discovered that these people had a little boy who was deformed and unable to walk. The mother was a hard-working woman, kind and clean, but the thought of amusing her child never came into her mind. She attended to his physical wants, and left him to lie for hours on a little bed, staring out of the window at the Park. Alethea made the child her charge. She walked to see him every afternoon, and, instead of the rather classical books which she and Nicholas had read before Portia was born, she now read nothing but fairy stories. The small boy, hump-backed, and with his head sunk deep between his shoulders, was very like some goblin of Hans Andersen's, and Alethea felt as she read, that she was living in the books. She enjoyed them as much as the child did.

Her letters to Nicholas were full of fairyland. She told him that their baby would certainly be a Hans Andersen child, really magic, after her months among elves and marsh maidens and fairy godmothers. It was a surprise to find for how many hours of her day she was able to live in this world of the imagination. The stories filled her mind not only while she was actually reading

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them, but as she walked to and fro in the park; and very often, when she was sitting alone in the library after dinner, she would take down the book, ostensibly to decide on a story for the next day, but actually to find herself dipping into page after page for an hour or more.

'There's no doubt', she said in one of her letters to Nicholas, 'that if the baby is a boy, he will have to be called Hans. I should love that for him, and I have never heard of it as an English boy's name.'

Hans was born about two months after Nicholas came home. From the first, he was an elfin baby, very tiny, with haunted eyes. They were never those pools of empty blue water with which most babies stare at the world; they were unchildlike, and seemed to hold memories.

'His eyes are like yours,' Alethea told Nicholas the first time she saw her son. 'You are both reincarnations, looking as though you could remember some tragic former life. Can you?'

'I can, but I'm sure he can't,' said Nicholas. 'The former life which I remember, was not in another age but in another continent.'

'Nurse, have you ever seen so young a baby with such a wonderful expression in his eyes?' Alethea asked.

Nurse said that she never had. She felt uneasy about the baby, although she did not say so to his

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mother. He was not an ordinary child, and she felt sure that there was something wrong with him.

Both Nicholas and Alethea were, however, immensely proud of their son; so much so that Portia became wildly jealous. She stamped her two little feet and clenched her fists, as she shrieked that they must 'Put the doll back in the toy cupboard. Don't want it any more.'

She refused to obey her nurse, and to 'love her little brother'.

It was not until after Hans had been given his fairy tale name that his parents had any suspicions that he was not like other children. He was now nearly six weeks old, and he had hardly grown at all since he was born. Yet he was not delicate. He took his food well, and he slept like other babies, but he remained as tiny as ever. Alethea became anxious.

'Doctor, I am not satisfied about Hans,' she said. 'I'm sure he cannot be digesting his food properly. He seems to make no progress.'

The doctor gave an evasive answer, but he advised another opinion. He had known Alethea all her life, and he felt that he could not tell her that her child was a dwarf, though that was what he feared. It was better that a stranger should break the news.

The London specialist confirmed the worst fears

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of the country doctor, and Nicholas was told the truth.

'I expect you would rather tell Lady Roxerby yourself,' the doctor said.

Nicholas appeared stunned, but at these words he roused himself with a flash of fury.

'Tell her myself? Certainly not. You must do it. . . . That is . . . if you are quite sure you are right. But isn't it possible that you are mistaken?'

The doctors thought it was impossible.

Alethea received the verdict more calmly than her husband had done; but then she would not allow herself to believe that it was irrevocable. A dwarf? The very word meant nothing to her. She could not realize it. Hans might not be tall like his father, but with care and good nourishment, he need only be a small man. What would that matter?

But when she saw Nicholas, she realized that for him it mattered terribly. He seemed utterly broken. She had not known the value which he appeared to put upon physical stature, and now she found that nothing could have hurt him more. He felt it as much as if he had been told that his child was an idiot. He sat silent, his head buried in his hands, refusing to look up, refusing to speak, refusing to hear what she said. It seemed to her that in one moment he had begun to hate his child.

Unhappy as she was, Alethea's unhappiness was

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not like this. In the first place, she could not believe the worst, and even if she had believed it, she could not picture to herself what it meant. But even if the worst were true, her response to it was a far greater feeling of tenderness for the little boy. More than ever he would need her love, her care, and her protection; and Alethea, who always answered quickly to a call on her pity, was ready to lavish all these upon her child.

Now she saw that Nicholas was far more pitiful than Hans and yet she could not help him. She came up against that miserable pride of his, forcing him to reject her sympathy as if it were a blow, even though he knew all the time that she was suffering too. His misery was fierce, like the misery of that trapped cat long ago; and it was just as helpless, just as antagonistic. He would not speak of Hans, or allow her to mention his name; so that after the first despairing day there stood between them a cruel bar of silence on the subject which was always in both their minds. Yet it prevented their speaking naturally of anything else. Alethea spent hours in the nursery, and Nicholas never entered the room. When they met for meals, he never spoke of where she had been or asked for news of the child. He looked at her resentfully, as though he defied her to break the silence he commanded on the one subject in her mind.

When they gardened together, everything

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seemed sham, as if each were affecting an interest for the sake of the other. Nicholas often went alone to the farm, while Alethea was with the child, and when she asked him how things were going, she felt that he hated her questions, and suspected her of asking them merely to 'take his mind off' the other subject. It seemed a hopeless impasse, for though Nicholas wouldn't speak of the child, he appeared to be angry with her if she ever spoke of anything else. And he, who had always been so tender towards her, now seemed not to care that she too was unhappy.

But there were times when she forgot her misery, and strange to say, these were only when she was in the nursery with the baby. Then love won. Hans was the most winning of babies, with his tiny body, and his curiously mature expression. As the months went on Alethea found that he was the only person in the house who ever smiled at her, and who could always call from her an answering smile. They played together like any other mother and child. All her happiness, and her only gleams of gaiety, came from the baby.

For Nicholas grew no better. A cloud of smouldering rancour had descended upon him, and it seemed to grow thicker. His unhappiness tore at her heart, but he would not let her try to comfort him. She knew that his only chance of seeing the thing more normally would be to come

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to the nursery and play with the child as she did. Then he might have realized that the baby's existence was not only a curse, but she dared not suggest this, and Nicholas was obstinate in avoiding the little boy.

One day, when they were walking in the Park, they passed the carpenter's cottage and saw the crippled child lying in the garden. Nicholas had never seen him before.

He stopped abruptly. His face darkening.

'What is that?' he asked.

'You know about him,' Alethea answered. 'He is Mrs Warren's crippled boy.'

'Crippled? That's no cripple. He is a dwarf.'

She was terrified at the sound in his voice.

He turned upon her.

'Alethea, what have you done? What have you done? I shall never forgive you.'

Alethea held on to the paling. She was almost falling to the ground.

'What . . . what do you mean?'

'You know. Yes, you know. *It is your fault.* You must have known it all along.'

His look of hatred scorched her.

'No Nicholas, don't say so. It can't be,' she said faintly.

There was no answer. She looked up, and saw that he had turned away, and was striding up the path to the cottage. His face was completely

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transformed with rage. What could he be going to do?

He knocked loudly upon the door, which was opened immediately by Warren. The man drew back when he saw the expression upon his master's face.

'You are discharged from to-day,' said Nicholas. 'Come to the house this evening and you will receive a month's pay, but you leave this cottage to-morrow!'

'Sir Nicholas, what have I done?'

'You have been employed by me, and you are required no longer. Our contract is terminated, and you need ask no questions. I have treated you fairly.'

He walked away, passing Alethea as if he did not see that she was still standing where he had left her.

Mrs. Warren ran into the garden.

'Please speak for us my lady,' she said. 'We can't get out of here to-morrow. Where can we go?'

Alethea burst into tears.

'I will see what I can do,' she said, feeling terribly ashamed of herself; and she followed Nicholas back to the house.

CHAPTER IX

NICHOLAS did not come in to tea, and Alethea did not see him till dinner time, when the servants were in the room. They endured one of their now usual uncomfortable meals, 'keeping up appearances' by an occasional remark upon some uninteresting subject, or talking to the dogs. All the time Alethea was thinking that as soon as they were alone she must try to persuade Nicholas to give the Warrens a little more time. She dreaded the idea of opening the subject, and yet it seemed dishonourable not to do so, after her promise to Mrs. Warren.

She spoke as the door shut behind the butler, feeling that if she waited, her courage would go.

'Nicholas you don't really mean, do you, that the Warrens must leave to-morrow?'

'As you know, I generally mean what I say.'

'But they can't find another house in a day, and what can they do with their furniture?'

'Warren is engaged by the week, and legally he can be discharged with a week's notice. I am being generous to him. I am paying him for a full month, and on the strength of that he can

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quite well find lodgings for himself and his family till he gets another place.'

'He may not get one, if people hear he has been sent off at a moment's notice. It sounds as if he had been dishonest.'

'Anyone wishing to engage him can ask me for his character.'

'People may not even trouble to ask about him, if they hear we have sent him off like this.'

'If they want to employ him they will ask.'

'Please give them a little time, at any rate, till you want the cottage for another man. You need not see them.'

'I shall not see them. They will go to-morrow.'

She knew that it was hopeless, but she made one more appeal—an appeal to which he would have listened a year ago.

'I feel so unhappy about it,' she said; 'as if their going was my fault.'

'You have more than that on your conscience,' was his answer, and his cruelty stung her into anger.

'You have no right to say that,' she said. 'How can you tell? There may be quite another cause.'

He jumped up.

'What do you mean?' he roared.

'I mean that you can't possibly tell that my having gone to see that little boy has anything at all to do with Hans being as he is. I can't believe

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that it could make any difference. There must be a more fundamental cause.'

'Fundamental? I don't understand you.'

'Perhaps some far-off inherited weakness. One knows so little about these things. Nicholas, you are cruelly unfair. You have always acted as if it was the fault of poor little Hans, and now you do the same to these unhappy Warrens. It is neither just nor generous.'

'I am perfectly just, and I have no wish to be generous.'

'Nicholas darling, do be generous—to me, to Hans, to the Warrens. It's because you don't try to be, that we are all so miserable. Don't let us search back into the whys and the wherefores of this thing: we shall never find them out. All we know is that our child must have a sad life, and that we, at any rate, can give him love and a happy childhood. Don't search miserably into the past, trying to find someone to blame for what is the fault of no individual. Let us look forward and try to make something of the future, for ourselves, and also for our little boy.'

'Don't be sentimental,' was all that Nicholas said in reply, as he turned away and left the room. His words sounded like a curse.

She did not see him again that evening, and the Warrens left the next day.

The months went by, and the strain grew less.

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Nicholas and Alethea took up their lives again, though the old happiness had gone. In the early days of their married life they enjoyed talking of the future, but now they never spoke of it. It only meant for them the thought of their deformed child. Not that Hans was actually deformed. He was indeed perfectly proportioned; but even before he was a year old, he was touchingly unlike other children, and of course, the contrast must become far greater when he was a man.

Still, the Roxerbys found a mode of living, as sufferers must always find. Like the invalid, who moves miserably about the bed till he reaches a position in which he can lie with the least discomfort, so they got through their days, keeping out of sight, as well as they could, the unhappiness which lurked in the recesses of their lives. Nicholas never spoke of his son, and never saw him. Alethea spent every possible moment with the child, for it was only thus that her life was bearable. She longed for Nicholas to know the child, his pretty merry ways, the sweetness of his temper, the winning charm of his welcoming smile. But she dared not suggest this to her husband. She even concealed from him the hours that she herself spent in the nursery, for she had grown to dread the look of sombre pain which came into his face at the thought of Hans.

So they snatched at an uncertain happiness by

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sharing the surface of their lives, each trying to cheat the other into forgetfulness of what neither of them ever forgot. Then, too, there was Portia to play with, and she was now able to run about and talk. If the truth were told, she was rather a disagreeable cantankerous child, but at any rate she was not a dwarf.

One afternoon in early spring, Alethea took Hans in his perambulator for a walk in the Park, and as she came back to the house, she was surprised to see a strange motor at the door. The butler was not in the hall to be questioned as to the arrival, and Alethea carried Hans to the nursery, and went to the library. When she approached the door she was startled by hearing her husband's voice speaking in what sounded to her to be tones of immense excitement. At first she could hardly believe that it was really Nicholas who was speaking, but she knew that something momentous must be happening. She quickened her steps and opened the door to find an amazing and inexplicable sight.

Nicholas was standing in the middle of the room, and Alethea's first impression was that he had grown several inches in height. He seemed to have become a giant; and his face, usually still and rather heavy, was transformed by fury. He was towering over a hideous little woman of about four feet in height. She stood looking up at him

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with her head thrown back defiantly, her arms akimbo, and her feet planted very far apart. Straight thin wisps of harsh black hair hung about her forehead in the wild burlesque of a fringe. Her face was yellowish in colour, but the large prominent teeth were so far more yellow than, beside them, the thick skin was almost sallow. The woman had a wide face with prominent cheekbones, and in it there blazed a pair of very remarkable, very black eyes. This astounding figure was clothed in a strange medley of colours. The dress of reddish purple was worn with a short jacket of dark green, and the yellow hat was surrounded by a blue ostrich feather. Short as the visitor was, her dress was even shorter, and in defiance of the fashion of the day, she displayed the greater part of her thick legs, as well as her feet, on which she wore a pair of strong useful boots.

Alethea stood spellbound, holding on to the handle of the door, and uncertain as to whether she had better come into the room or not.

Her entrance stopped the conversation, and Nicholas and the dwarf both turned to look at her.

There was an uneasy pause and then Nicholas said:

‘Mrs. Roxerby.’

Alethea thought he must indeed be mad, as this had never been her title.

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She came forward, not knowing whether or not she was expected to shake hands.

'You don't seem over-pleased to see me,' said the woman. 'I am Nicholas's mother.'

His mother! It was utterly impossible. Alethea looked at Nicholas to get his denial of this maniac's words.

He said nothing. He was looking at her, and now she knew the trap which had always gripped him, and from which he had looked upon the world with that haughty hatred.

She knew that the woman was speaking the truth; and as she took Mrs. Roxerby's hand, she heard her own voice trying to sound normal.

'I didn't know you were Nicholas's mother. Of course I am glad to see you.'

'Don't trouble to lie about it,' said Nicholas. 'You are not glad, and I have already told my mother that *I* am not.'

Mrs. Roxerby turned upon him with an expression of exultant spite.

'Go on!' she said hoarsely. 'Let me have it! I suppose you hadn't told your wife that your mother was a dwarf.'

Alethea could see how this shaft went home, and she could not bear to know how much Nicholas was hurt by it.

'Nicholas and I tell each other everything,' she said very calmly.

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The woman was evidently thwarted.

'Then you know he's ashamed of me,' she retaliated. 'Calls himself a Roxerby, and thinks he is a cut above people like me.'

'Hold your bloody tongue, you little bitch,' Nicholas broke in, and in spite of herself, Alethea could not help recoiling before this unknown violent man. He was a stranger to her.

'Mind what you're at,' sneered the dwarf. 'Don't curse and swear before her ladyship. She don't like it. You are forgetting that you aren't at home.'

'Mind your own business, you blasted deformity and get out of this house. Brokeyates is now my home and here I am master. You have no right here.'

'Well, if the place did come from your father's people, you're none the less beholden to me in it. You live here on *my* money; and you got your son and heir through being *my* son. The dwarf's blood comes from our side of the family.'

The venom in her voice was inhuman; and she looked triumphantly round, revelling in the effect of her words; for Alethea had been unable to restrain a little gasping sob; while Nicholas leapt towards his mother, his fists clenched, his face crimson.

She looked up at him as he stood over her with

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murder in his eye. She even laughed at him. She had no fear.

'That's right,' she said. 'Hit a man your own size. Oh, you English gentleman!'

'I wouldn't touch you with the end of a barge-pole,' said Nicholas, letting his hands fall to his side. 'But it is a lie that I live here on your money. It is my own. I am a partner in the business as much as you are.'

'A fat lot of good you are as a partner,' she scoffed, with a discordant laugh. 'I only put you in for the sake of appearances. Every penny was made by my father and by me. You Roxerbys have never been any good. You owe all you've got to me—your money, and your dwarf son.'

Again she saw that this gibe was more than he could bear.

'Get out of this, you damned dwarf, and take your vile money with you. Listen to me. From this moment I disown you and all that is yours. I will never touch another penny that comes from Australia. Get back there with it, and take with you the miserable brat which I owe to your unholy blood. Yes. It's true. Yours is the dwarf's blood and you seem proud of it. You can take the dwarf away with you. I never want to see him or you again. Out of this house, and take the boy with you. Alethea, do you hear? This woman has got to go, and she shall take the child. It's true what

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she says: he's more hers than ours. Let her have him, and a good riddance.'

'Nicholas, I can't,' said Alethea. 'You don't know what you are saying.'

'I know well enough. Do as I tell you. Go and fetch the child. She can have him now.'

'I won't let him go,' said Alethea.

'Give him to me,' said the dwarf. She enjoyed the sight of Alethea's anguished face, and she saw that her son was so beside himself with fury that he never observed it. Mrs. Roxerby knew Nicholas well enough to realize that he would act quickly, carried away by the violent temper which was one of her legacies to him; and that afterwards he would be in despair at knowing what he had done to his wife.

'Go and tell nurse to get him ready,' Nicholas was saying to Alethea. 'Mrs. Roxerby cannot wait, and the boy must go with her.'

Alethea went out of the room. She seemed to be living in a wild dream in which the events raced at headlong speed. Desperately she tried to keep some control of them. She looked at the clock in the hall. It was nearly four o'clock, and the London train left in half an hour. Could she catch it? She ran to the nursery, and hastily threw Hans' clothes on to him again, and then she carried him down a side staircase and into the stable yard. On her way, she snatched up her purse and her cheque-book.

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The chauffeur was in the garage, and Alethea was quickly driven to the station with her child. The train had already arrived and she had only time to buy a ticket and to jump in. Two hours later, she was in London.

CHAPTER X

IT WAS evening. Nicholas sat alone at Broke-yates. The house was painfully silent, and in the reaction after his violent fit of temper, he seemed to have no life left. He was only aware of a dull aching misery and an overwhelming sense of shame. He writhed as he remembered each episode in that horrible afternoon, each word which had been spoken by himself or by his mother.

When Alethea did not come back, Nicholas had left Mrs. Roxerby in the library and had gone in search of his wife, only to find that she and Hans had left the house. His anger was redoubled, for he guessed that his mother would realize that Alethea had tricked them both. He went back, and told her that the nurse could not get the child ready at once, but that he would be sent to London the next day; and he could not tell whether Mrs. Roxerby was deceived by this or not. At any rate she said nothing. The interval caused by his absence from the room seemed to have calmed them both. They were both weary and jaded, and they could quarrel no more.

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'I don't see what you've got against me to put you into such a rage,' Mrs. Roxerby said. 'I've done nothing except coming here without letting you know I was coming. Of course, you didn't want your wife to see me, and I expect I look worse than she expected, though I don't suppose you ever described me as a beauty.'

'God forbid!' Nicholas interjected.

'*You* haven't got the right to forbid me to come to England,' the woman went on. 'Someone had to come, to see about this steel contract, the one we were talking about when you were over in Melbourne; and I thought I might as well take the trip. I thought I should like to see the sort of place you have got over here. You can't say anything against that, can you? After all, I *am* your mother.'

'I don't need reminding of that,' said Nicholas bitterly.

'Then I don't see what right a son has to order his mother as to where she may go.'

'You can go where you like for all I care, as long as you don't come here. You have never cared for me nor I for you. There's been no pretence about it, and don't let us begin pretending now. All I ask from you is to be left alone.'

They were walking towards the door. He stopped before going out with her onto the steps.

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'Remember this,' he said. 'I meant what I said about the money. I am going to have no more of it. I give up my partnership from to-day. I no longer have a share in your business, and I shall draw no more money. You boast that it is all yours. Then let it be yours. I shall never touch another penny of it.'

'And what do you gain by that?' she asked. 'You lose a good deal you know.'

'I gain the untold advantage of cutting myself off from you and from all that can remind me of you,' he answered bitterly.

'If you don't want to be reminded of me, you had better not have any more children. I won't promise to take any more off your hands.'

And with that last shot she left him.

In the silence that succeeded her departure, her final words had echoed again and again. He could not go back to the library, for in it he knew that he would see nothing but the hated figure of his mother as she had stood there defying him. And now, when darkness had come, and he found himself alone after dinner, he sat in the dining-room and thought of his life, telling himself that he had been a doomed man from the first.

His mother and he had always felt for each other that unconquerable hatred which can only exist between two people linked together in the toils of

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an unescapable wrong. Mrs. Roxerby could not look at Nicholas without being reminded of the humiliations she had suffered from his father. At the time of her marriage, she had been passionately in love with her husband, and she then had had no idea that her person was unattractive. She had actually been vain of her appearance. It seemed to her quite natural that the handsome Englishman should have fallen in love with her. But once they were married, he had openly admitted that her money had been her one attraction, and he had not attempted to conceal the aversion which he felt for her person. She soon knew that he loathed her; and it was not long before she returned his loathing with a bitterness increased by wounded love and pride. She could not forgive him for being the first to show her what her appearance was really like.

And as Nicholas grew up, she recognized in him the same repulsion from her which his father had had, intensified in his case by the fact that he knew her blood was in his veins. He had been teased at school because he was the son of a dwarf, and he could not forgive his mother for having brought him into the world. As long as he remained in Australia, he never for a moment forgot the handicap with which he had started his life, and for which he blamed his mother. This permanently embittered him, making him suspicious

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of any offered friendship, and defiant when he was disliked.

England and Brokeyates had been his opportunity. Here the stigma of his birth was unknown, and he was the son of his father, not of his mother. He expanded in the spacious easy amateur life of an English county, where his Australian money and his Australian business training had given him an advantage. Brokeyates wanted him, and he had never been wanted before.

And then he had married Alethea. To have done this seemed to free him for ever from his sense of inferiority. This exquisite creature loved him as he loved her. She believed in his powers, in his achievements, in his future. Life in Australia became a half-forgotten dream.

Looking back, Nicholas saw that the blunder he had made had been that visit to Australia. How futile it seemed, now that he had cut himself off from the business which had demanded it. If he had broken away then, there would have been no need for his mother to come to see him when she came to England. And if he had stayed with Alethea through those months she would not have spent those fatal hours with the hideous little dwarf in the carpenter's cottage. For Nicholas still assured himself that this was the cause of Hans' deformity. He would not allow himself to think that such a thing could be hereditary, although he knew that

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the world would think so. Alethea herself must now have no doubt that it was so. He writhed as he thought of how his conduct must appear to her. She had always told him that he was unjust to the Warrens, as well as to herself and to Hans, and now she knew that he had all along had this frightful thing to hide. Yet, he still told himself that he had been honest throughout. He still believed what he had insisted upon all along. It was not possible that the puny body of his son could be an inheritance from himself. He repudiated the idea with every fibre of his magnificent physique.

As Nicholas thought things over he saw that Alethea had done well in going away. She had saved him from an act of mad cruelty. It would have been unpardonable to take her child from her, and to compel her to hand him over to the grotesque and inhuman little being whose existence had suddenly been revealed to her. Alethea had preserved him from this. She had been his better self.

Then there swept over him the realization that she was gone. Could it mean that she had left him altogether, horrified at what he had shown her of his true nature? He could not believe it, knowing her lovely generous spirit. She would save the child, but surely she would not leave her husband for ever! Yet, who would blame her if she did?

The next morning Nicholas tried to face his

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changed financial position. He would have no more money from Australia, and on this he had hitherto lived at Brokeyates, as his mother had pointed out. There remained the income from the estate, and although, thanks to his improvements, this was paying better than it had done when he succeeded, yet he knew that he was from henceforth a poor man. He realized this, but he did not realize all that it implied, for he had always been rich. He saw, at any rate, that he must dismiss most of the servants in the house.

If its walls had been conscious (as the walls of old houses may be, holding within them as they do the 'soul' of which we are sometimes aware) they would now have seen in Nicholas something of that same spirit of perverse satisfaction with which Sir Henry had waited for his house to fall about his ears. Nicholas felt a bitter joy in cutting down the comforts which had grown to be necessities. He planned a life which should be lived in two or three rooms, while the rest of the house was unused. With frenzy, he insisted, that very first day, on having the shutters shut in all the rooms which he meant to abandon, so that the darkened passages led to dark rooms—rooms cut off from life, left vacant for grey unhappy ghosts to haunt them. When he carried a light up the stairs, he saw his shadow move across these darkened corridors, and the movement made them emptier.

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When he heard his own footsteps in the hall, the silent house seemed the more silent.

Three days passed without a word from Alethea. Nicholas tried to stir himself to anger in order to quiet his anxiety; but the thought that she had gone for ever out of his life seemed to be killing him. And he knew he had done it himself. He could not blame her, try as he might.

On the third morning a letter in her handwriting was on the table. It came from Paris. Alethea wrote from a hotel, and her envelope contained only a scrap of paper. On it were written these words:

'I have taken Hans away, as I see that it makes you so unhappy to have him in your house. I could not give him to a stranger. We are well, and if anything goes wrong with either of us, you shall hear. I leave here this evening. Alethea.'

That was all.

CHAPTER XI

As a little girl, Alethea had been very fond of the German wife of one of her uncles; but when he died, Tante Helena went back to Bavaria, where she subsequently married one of her fellow-countrymen. Since then, she had never been in England, and though there had been many plans for Alethea to go and stay with her at Friedenbach, something had always interfered with them. It had become increasingly difficult for her to leave her grandfather, and after Nicholas had come into her life, Tante Helena had almost vanished from her memory. They had not written to each other for some years.

Then, during that frightful journey to London, when Alethea had left behind her everything in her life except the baby in her arms, the thought of the German aunt had suddenly come back into her mind. She would take the child to Friedenbach. Nicholas could never find her there, for he had never even heard Countess Friedenbach's name. Such was her confidence in Tante Helena's love, that Alethea quite naturally resolved, after a silence of five or six years, to telegraph to the

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Countess announcing her arrival with her baby. She did not even know whether Tante Helena had heard of her marriage.

So, after writing to Nicholas from Paris, Alethea set off on a long and weary journey to Bavaria. She was very unused to travelling, and she found everything difficult. She had forgotten most of her German, and it seemed impossible to make herself understood. She had hardly ever seen Hans cry, but to her despair he cried a great deal in the train. Alethea was panic-stricken, thinking that in her ignorance she was already doing some fatal harm to the child's health, though really there was nothing wrong except that Hans was tired, and was missing the very regular routine to which his nurse had accustomed him.

The maddening rhythmic roar of the train set going in Alethea's mind recurrent circles of unhappy thoughts. Round and round they came, always leading her back at last to their miserable starting-point. She could not get out of her mind the memory of Mrs. Roxerby. The picture of the hideous dwarf seemed photographed upon the retina of her eyes and she could not drive it away. As it stood before her, she hugged Hans closely to her, and hid his face against her, dreading the sight of him for fear that something in his face might resemble the inhuman little object who had suddenly declared herself to be his grandmother.

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And with the thought of that unexpected revelation, she felt again the shock with which she had learnt that Nicholas had all along kept this secret from her. She had no pity for him. She thought of his injustice towards her, and towards his workman, and she realized that when he was throwing all the responsibility for Hans' misfortune onto her, he had known this about his own mother. She could not forgive him. And when she felt most bitter against him, the thought of Portia would recur. When she ran away with Hans, she had never given a thought to the other child. Now she remembered her, left to the mercy of a man who had shown himself utterly cruel and unprincipled. What would become of Portia now?

The train beat out no answer to these agonizing questions. It only hammered them in more and more insistently every hour, with no interruption except, from time to time, the fretful crying of Hans.

At last they reached the end of their journey. Alethea got out onto the platform of a little country station, and holding Hans in her arms, she watched the train go away. She felt as if she had escaped from a horde of demons, who, for as long as she could remember, had been dragging her bruised body over an unending road made of screeching pebbles, to the tune of a loud chorus of iron voices. In contrast with this, the station was

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unbelievably quiet, and the morning air a miracle of freshness. The light came over the mountains with a cool clarity.

She had stepped off the brink of the world she had known. She was standing alone with her baby in a completely strange land, and she felt no fear. Instead, there came to her an ineffable peace from the distant snow-covered mountains. As she looked up at them, they seemed transparent, not of this earth: they were spirit hills, made of pure morning light. It was like an awakening in Paradise. She found herself in no rapturous Heaven, ranked with singing angels or filled with the music of seraphic harmonies. No, this was a very quiet place, apart, it seemed, from saints and sinners alike. No one could follow her here. The valley was a crystal globe, holding in its clear serenity herself and her child.

Hans too, felt the spirit of the place. His fretfulness had gone, and he stared at the mountains with the deep wise gaze of a baby who has not learnt to speak. When once that art has been acquired, it is but too easy to splash about in the shallows of passing impressions, and to imagine all the while that one is in the ocean; but a baby watches the sky or the sea out of unplumbed deeps of wonder.

Alethea engaged a little carriage and started on the nine miles drive to Friedenbach. The way was

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by a wide valley, all flat green fields through which a little stream played its way. The month was April, and the snow had melted from the lower hills, while the early morning sun threw blue shadows from the remoter snow mountains across the meadow green. The little woods were breaking into thin leaves, and somewhere she heard a cuckoo. A sudden drift of crocuses across the grass took her breath. She thought at first that it was a belated patch of snow, but when she saw the pure white breaking now and again into the very palest mauve, she knew that she was looking at flowers. There were large pale cowslips too, like polyanthus, and she could not resist asking the driver to stop for a little time, while she lifted Hans out of the carriage and set him down among the soft golden flowers. The cowslips were exactly the same colour as his eyes.

‘How strange’, she thought, ‘to have eyes of greenish-gold! And how beautiful they are!’

Hans was very happy sitting on the grass. He grabbed at all the flowers he could reach, and he laughed and talked inarticulately to himself. Alethea wanted to make him a cowslip ball, but she had not with her that prosaic necessity, a reel of cotton; so she could only pick the separate blossoms and throw them at Hans, and he threw them back. The driver of their carriage was not at all disturbed by this dallying on the part of his

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fare. He evidently quite understood it, and he lit his pipe and threw himself flat on his back on the grass to smoke, enjoying the morning as much as Alethea and the child.

They played there for half an hour, but when they got back into the carriage, Alethea's courage began to fail her. It suddenly came home to her that she was approaching a house, the owner of which she had never seen, while his wife had gone out of her life years ago. To these almost strangers she had dared to announce her visit by the mere sending of a telegram from Paris, and now she was arriving at their house without having waited for an answer. Perhaps the Friedenbachs had long ago sold the house. In any case, they might be away on a visit. It might be even that Tante Helena had forgotten her. Alethea became very frightened. The place was Paradise no more, for the agitations of the world had broken in.

The drive took nearly two hours, and as time went on Alethea grew more and more alarmed at her own audacity. The road meandered along, taking as many curves as the stream which it followed. They crossed little stone bridges, skirted woods, passed roadside Calvarys, and now and again they drove through a little village. At every turn Alethea expected to find herself at Friedenbach, and each time she tried to prepare her arrival, and to rehearse her first words on see-

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ing Tante Helena. But her trouble was that she didn't even know if she would find the Friedenbachs at all, and if she did find them, she didn't know what they would be like.

At last they turned off the main road, to follow a rough track which led right away into the mountains. They drove under an avenue of dark fir trees. The road grew chilly and Alethea shivered. Hans seemed frightened and he cuddled closer to her. She tried to stir up some courage in herself to pass on to him.

Then they emerged into a gay little inner valley, tucked away out of sight. It had its own streamlet, much tinier and noisier than the one they had hitherto followed; and there were no more stone bridges, for this absurd little stream was crossed by nothing more formal than fords or stepping-stones. The fields were filled with cows and calves, sheep and lambs; and, scattered over the grass, the cowslips, crocuses and anemones grew more thickly than ever. A friendly little house stood in a field. Its plastered walls were gay with bright coloured Rococo paintings. Two dogs lay asleep outside. The carriage stopped, and Alethea felt that her heart too had stopped beating.

Then there was the sound of a quick footstep, and Tante Helena had come to meet them. As a child, Alethea had always thought her aunt the prettiest person she knew, but in those days she

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had not really appreciated the quality of her beauty. Or perhaps, when Tante Helena wore the fashionable clothes of the hour, she had merely looked a little more charming than other people. Now she was completely individual. She wore the dress of the country, and in it she might have been an empress unsuccessfully trying to hide her royal bearing beneath the disguise of a peasant woman. Yet she seemed entirely simple and unsophisticated. She walked with the ease and dignity of some proud wild creature, and her bright blue eyes looked out with a happy challenge. They seemed wider open than most eyes are, and yet there was nothing staring about them. They looked freely at you, as blue flowers do. Tante Helena's skin was clear and healthy, but Alethea thought she had never before seen so sunburnt a face. She herself had been taught to protect her skin with veils and parasols, so that no weather should spoil its whiteness, and this brown glow struck her as very foreign. Countess Friedenbach's head was nobly set on her shoulders, and she carried it nobly. Grandly as she moved, she also moved with an amazing swiftness, and Alethea had barely time to recognize her and so to make sure that they had reached the right house before she was in Tante Helena's arms.

'My darling Alethea! This is the loveliest surprise of my life!' And never did a joyous voice

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convey more completely a joyous welcome. 'And you have brought your baby. This is better than my dreams. My dear, he is indeed *ein sternchen*.'

The 'little star' twinkled very prettily at this compliment. He looked up at Tante Helena, twisted his face into a most comical smile, and then laughed outright.

'O, the angel!' said Tante Helena. 'He loves me already.' And she took him to her heart.

The Friedenbachs had no children, and they were delighted to have a baby in the house. Tante Helena was a woman of tact and she asked no questions, treating it as the most natural thing in the world that her niece should arrive out of the blue, with scarcely any warning, with very scanty luggage, and with a little boy in her arms. They began again where they had left off when Tante Helena left England: and with this plunge back into her girlhood, Alethea could hardly believe herself to be the same woman who had made that agonized journey across Europe. The last few days fell from her like the memory of a book read in the train. She was no longer the person who had endured them. They existed for her in the remoteness of a tale that has been told, while she herself lived in the person of the girl who had loved Tante Helena all those years ago.

And so began a visit touched by magic. Alethea was transported into the past to find again her gay

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youthfulness. The weight of the past year fell from her. She forgot the misery of Hans' misfortune: she forgot the pall of enmity which had fallen over her happy love for Nicholas, making of their marriage a long drawn-out funeral: she even forgot her marriage itself. And with these memories had gone her love for her husband. He ceased to exist for her. When she thought of him, he seemed an imaginary person read of in some fantastic romance. She could not believe that still, in England, in a house which she had always known, and which had been for nearly four years her home, there actually lived the man who had become for her so shadowy a figure. It was impossible too, that there could be, living with this man, a child of her own. She sometimes thought that she was dead. These must surely be the Elysian Fields, a land of peace which the world cannot touch, and where the memory of it is no more than a picture seen in a faded tapestry.

Alethea began to feel that she had always lived in this cool sunlit valley. Her life there was entirely carefree. Hans was her only occupation. She did everything for him—bathed him, dressed him, gave him his meals, took him for walks; and his crib was beside her bed at night. She never left him, except in the evening when he was asleep, and then she sometimes listened for an hour or so to Tante Helena's exquisite piano playing, or

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refreshed her German by hearing the Count read Schiller to his wife. Time stood still. Alethea recalled no past: she looked on to no future. And because each day was exactly like the last, she rested in a timeless present. No clock ever sounded in that valley. It was true that the morning sun rose over the hills which faced her window, to sink, at night, on the other side of the house; but each day that he brought with him might have been the same day, and at night he took nothing away.

Hans was as happy as a baby could be. He was now able to walk, and he tumbled about and played in the meadows, trying to catch the little mountain butterflies. Alethea used to lie on the grass, her hands behind her head as she watched him lurching about; and when he was tired she would draw him down onto the ground beside her, and make up baby stories to amuse him till he went to sleep. Then Alethea would sit for hours holding him in her arms, while her eyes moved from the little face so near to her, away to the great soft outlines of the mountains on the horizon. Two years ago she would have thought such a life unbearably dull: now she could imagine no other.

Countess Friedenbach was puzzled. In spite of the unquestioning manner in which she had accepted Alethea's sudden descent upon her, she had of course guessed from the first that something tragic lay behind it. She quickly divined that the

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trouble was concerned with Hans and his pathetically dwarfed body, and she waited for Alethea to speak of it in time. Then, the weeks passed, and no confidence came. Instead Alethea quite lost the unhappy look which had been on her face when she arrived, and she seemed to have entirely forgotten her trouble, whatever it was. She obviously had no desire to make a confidence; and yet, equally obviously, there must be a confidence to be made. There must exist an explanation of Alethea's having left her husband without any wish ever to mention his name, and of her having left England to hide in the Bavarian uplands with a charming little dwarf baby.

Tante Helena became anxious, and told the Count that she thought Alethea was suffering from loss of memory.

The Count declared that she was certainly not 'suffering' from it.

'She may have fled from England because there is something she wishes to forget. Do not spoil her peace here by forcing her to "suffer" from unpleasant memories.'

'Still, if a husband is among those unpleasant memories, I don't know if I can altogether acquiesce in his being buried alive.'

'If he acquiesces, and he seems to do so, he's not worth digging up,' replied the Count, and he would help no more. He liked to see Alethea

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happy, and he was quite willing that she and Hans should stay at Friedenbach as long as they lived.

It was true that at the back of Alethea's mind there was a complete numbness. She had reached Friedenbach haunted by the prospect that she would have to explain to Tante Helena what had happened in England. No explanation was asked for and she let that go. Then she had thought that she would have to come to a decision as to her own future, but for this too, there seemed no immediate hurry. Nothing mattered in this timeless place. She lay in the meadows and allowed the days to drift over her.

They drifted too over Hans, although, unlike his mother, he did not lie still. He tumbled and rolled about in the short flower-prankt grass, and with every day, he grew more elfin in appearance. He was, of course, much smaller than an ordinary child of nearly two years old, but he seemed far more active. He flitted about all day with movements as erratic as those of the butterflies he was always trying to catch. When Alethea turned her head to look for him (and this was often the limit of her activities in a day) she always found him bobbing about in a completely unexpected place. He was here, there, and everywhere, and when he tumbled down, as he often did, he never cried. Instead, he jabbered away to the tangled grass which had tripped him up, using a language of his own, quite

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incomprehensible to Alethea. She sometimes thought that she detected a German word, but at last she decided that he was speaking Danish, and that he must have absorbed it from his namesake Hans Andersen. Absurd fancies like this filled her mind. Her thoughts travelled no further than the ring of mountain tops which made her horizon. That world was enough.

CHAPTER XII

I DON'T think we have spoken to you of Lady Uffcote, have we?" said Tante Helena one morning. "She has heard that you are staying here and she wants to see you."

"To see me? Why? Who is she?"

Alethea looked agitated.

"She is a very old English lady, who has lived for many years in a wonderful old house up in the mountains. The present peer is her step-son, and she apparently doesn't care much about him. She has heard nothing of England for years, but when I told her that I had an English guest, she seemed to long to hear something of her native land."

"I wish you hadn't told her about me. I'm sure I couldn't tell her anything that would interest her. I know nothing about her or her relations."

"Do go and see her," said Countess Friedenbach. "It really would be a kindness, for she is very old and lonely, and rather sad. It would do her good to see someone young, and to hear her own language spoken again."

Alethea resisted. Just then, she had only one strong emotion, and that was a desire to forget

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that she had ever lived anywhere but here. As long as the past was shut out, she was entirely at peace. She shrank from being questioned by an unknown old woman.

But Tante Helena insisted, which seemed unlike herself. Hitherto, she had allowed Alethea to do just as she pleased; but now she felt that the time must come to rouse her from the sleep into which she seemed to have fallen. The Countess was not at all anxious to write to Sir Nicholas, at any rate until she knew more about him, and about the relations between him and his wife; but, on the other hand, she knew that it was impossible for the present situation to be indefinitely prolonged. She could not permanently join in a conspiracy to hide a wife from her lawful husband, at any rate without knowing why she was doing it. She saw that Alethea had had a shock, and she thought that the gentlest way of calling her back to reality might be to persuade her to speak of England with somebody who knew nothing at all about her, and who therefore could say nothing which might recall the past too abruptly.

She had already said something of this kind to the Count, who told her that she spoke as if she thought that Alethea was mad.

'I think she is,' Tante Helena had then said. 'Though her brain isn't affected.'

'What then?'

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'Her heart has been broken.'

68 The Count told his wife that English women were not sentimental enough to allow their hearts to be broken; but in consequence of this conversation, both he and his wife were curious to see how Alethea would take the suggestion that she should go to see Lady Uffcote. When she so obviously disliked it, the Count was disposed to let the matter drop. He did not want his guest to be worried. However, the Countess for once was obstinate. She had resolved that the present deadlock must cease, and she thought that Lady Uffcote might be used as the thin end of the wedge. Gentle as she appeared to be, Tante Helena had far too great a sense of responsibility to remain inactive while anyone she cared for was drifting towards disaster. She was beginning to think that if Alethea's state of lethargy went on much longer her mind might be permanently affected by it. She had great determination when once she had made up her mind, and she generally carried her point. So it came about that a few days later, Alethea drove off after luncheon in the Count's carriage, to call on the unknown English woman, leaving Hans to the care of Tante Helena.

They drove away into the mountains. Up and up they went—through summer woods of every shade of green, through forests of firs, through treeless mountain spaces where the snow still lay

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in heaps. Alethea looked back over the way they had come. It was true that they had left the Friedenbach valley far below them, but this fellow countrywoman of hers evidently shared her own desire to leave the world behind. Although it was now possible to see a far greater distance than could be seen in the valley, yet the great view only revealed how many mountains there were in the world among which one could lose oneself.

At last they reached the mountain fortress in which Lady Uffcote had made her home. It was a mediæval castle standing in a commanding position at the head of a great gorge. A magnificent view was spread below it, and not another sign of human habitation could be seen. No birds seemed to have flown so high as this. The castle might almost have been a natural formation of the rocks among which it was set. It stood like a prehistoric monument, motionless among the winds.

Inside, the air was still and very cold. Alethea was led down a narrow stone passage to the room where Lady Uffcote sat, and when she came upon the old woman she thought she had never before seen anyone so like a corpse.

'Could it be possible,' she thought, 'in these heights, to live on for centuries after the world would call one dead, changed, oneself, into the thin air which is all there is to breathe?' It seemed that something like this must have happened to

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Lady Uffcote. She looked immensely old, and she was very thin and haggard. Her skin had turned to faded rice-paper, and there was no colour in her lips. Her eyes were sunk very deep in their old sockets, and in them was the only colour to be seen in her face. Yet even this could hardly be called a colour. It was rather a shadow—a very dark shadow. Those eyes had the tone of very old bronze, which in the course of centuries has accumulated a patina of indescribable shades of earthy blue and green. They would have been startling, in their contrast with the pallor of Lady Uffcote's skin, but for the blue hollows which surrounded them, and which merged gradually into the deathlike whiteness of the rest of the face. A black lace veil was thrown over the white hair, and fastened by a brooch which was made of a single emerald. The green stone shone like an evil eye. Lady Uffcote sat very still, in a vast arm-chair, its high back upholstered in dark blue brocade and, with the gesture of a blind woman, she spread two astonishingly thin hands in the direction of her guest, as Alethea was announced.

There was something terrible in her appearance. She might have been the one survivor of a by-gone world, washed up on to this mountain top, by some deluge long ago, and left there alone and forgotten by the abating waters. Alethea was overwhelmed by the horror of such loneliness.

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'I hardly remember how to speak English,' said Lady Uffcote, 'but the name of Roxerby I have not forgotten.'

This unexpected welcome alarmed Alethea. What could be Lady Uffcote's connection with the family of Roxerby?

'It is kind of you to invite me to come to see you,' was what she said.

'I hardly know why I did,' replied her hostess. 'As a rule, I wish to be left alone; but when I heard of you, you seemed to me to be a solitary like myself, and I thought we might understand each other.'

'I am afraid that you will think me a very stupid visitor,' said Alethea. 'I seem to have nothing fresh to say to anyone. I do nothing but take my baby for walks.'

'Ah! You have a baby. Then you at least are not solitary.'

'Does that mean that we have less in common than you thought?' asked Alethea.

'I think not; for I suppose you came to Bavaria in search of solitude, as I did, years ago.'

'And in this lovely place you have lived alone for years?'

'In this lovely place I have lived alone for years.'

'It is very beautiful,' said Alethea, turning to look through the long narrow window upon the

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unbelievable magnificance of the panorama spread below them.

'It is very beautiful.'

Silence fell. Alethea felt that there was something uncanny in the way in which the old woman repeated her phrases. She began to be impatient. What had made Lady Uffcote wish to see her? They had nothing to say to each other.

Lady Uffcote seemed to be looking at her, but it was impossible to tell whether there was any sight in the sunken old eyes.

Alethea stared at the distant hills. She was resolved not to make another remark. If this old woman wished to avoid society, she at least would not inflict upon her more conversation than was necessary.

At last Lady Uffcote broke the silence.

'Are you happy in the solitude you have come so far to find?' she asked.

'Happy?' said Alethea. The word seemed meaningless to her.

'Happy,' Lady Uffcote repeated.

Alethea made no reply.

'It was a long way to come,' Lady Uffcote went on, after a pause.

'You came as far,' said Alethea, 'and I suppose it satisfies you. You did not regret it.'

'What makes you say that?'

'You stayed here all these years.'

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'I stayed here all these years.'

'Then you do not regret coming?'

'I do not regret coming,' Lady Uffcote gazed for some time into space. 'But I regret the need for coming,' she then said.

She lapsed into silence.

A servant brought in some coffee and cakes.

Lady Uffcote roused herself from what appeared to be a long searching look into an invisible past. She gave Alethea a cup of coffee, foaming with whipped cream. The little cakes had a curious flavour. They were scented with herbs.

The meal passed silently. Alethea had by now decided that her hostess was rather pleasantly mad. Such insanity did not alarm her. She would have been far less at ease with a sane and intelligent compatriot who might have questioned her as to why she had left England. It was obvious that Lady Uffcote was only interested in her own reasons for having hidden herself in the mountains.

'Who are you?' she asked, suddenly and unexpectedly.

Alethea started.

'I am Lady Roxerby.'

'You are Lady Roxerby.' Once more the voice might have been a sinister echo of her own words.

'I knew the Roxerbys,' Lady Uffcote said. 'And Brokeyates.'

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She seemed to wish the subject closed. She poured herself out some more coffee, and she ate two little cakes. Alethea watched her. She felt that she was being hypnotized by the movements of those thin, claw-like hands, by the long silences, and by the utterances of that dead voice.

'So you brought your baby with you,' Lady Uffcote said at last. 'Why did you do that?'

'I could not leave him behind.'

'I had no baby to bring,' said Lady Uffcote. 'If I had had one, I should not have wanted to come.'

'I came because of mine,' Alethea said, in spite of herself.

There was vibration in her tone. Lady Uffcote looked at her, and seemed for the first time to see her. It was as if Alethea had now become a figure in the invisible scene which she had always before her eyes. A strange flush spread over the emaciated face. Something stirred between the two women. Hitherto, their talk had been like the talk of people in a dream, but life had come into the room when Alethea spoke of her child.

'Tell me about yourself,' said Lady Uffcote, and her voice had become urgent. 'I must know. You need not be afraid of me. I have been dead for so long.'

Alethea shook her head.

'You are not a widow, are you?'

'No,' said Alethea.

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'But you have left your husband. Tell me about him. Whose son is he? I care very much. I knew them both in the old days—Bob and Henry. Are you married to the son of Bob Roxerbys?'

'His grandson,' said Alethea. She saw Lady Uffcote suddenly anew. This then was the wreck of the beautiful girl who had broken the lives of those two young men. She now remembered that she had heard her grandfather say that Dulcibella Cheverell had married a Lord Uffcote. Yes: the old woman had spoken truly. She had indeed been dead for many years.

'His grandson,' Lady Uffcote repeated. 'His grandson—he should have been mine.'

The full import of her words caught Alethea by the throat like a murderous hand. Yes: it was true. From this old woman had come the curse which had blighted her own marriage. But for Dulcibella Cheverell, there would have been no dwarf's blood in the veins of the Roxerbys. Alethea could to-day have been happy with Nicholas, and Hans would have been like other children. Alethea felt that she was choking.

'Why did you do it?' she heard herself say, and her voice sounded miles away. 'Why did you leave him? Why did you go away?'

'Ah, why?' said Lady Uffcote, and her voice was utterly miserable. 'I went . . . because it was too difficult for me to stay. And you,' she

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roused herself to ask, 'why did *you* go away?'

Alethea faced her for a moment, and then she leant her head very wearily upon her hand.

'For the same reason I suppose. I found it too difficult to stay.'

Lady Uffcote seemed to be nerving herself for a great effort. She clutched the arms of her chair with both hands, and Alethea thought that she was going to rise to her feet.

'That was my mistake, my crime,' she said, 'and if I can, I must save you from doing the same thing. It *was* difficult for me, but life was far more difficult afterwards. I made myself for ever unhappy, and I ruined two men's lives.'

'More than the lives of two men. It's not over yet. You don't know the harm you did.'

The words broke involuntarily from Alethea.

'We never do,' Lady Uffcote said. 'But what we do know is as much as we can bear. More. Far more.'

'It isn't fair,' Alethea was saying, heedless of the old woman's words. 'It is because you went long ago that I have had to go now.'

'Go back, I pray you,' Lady Uffcote said. 'I am so old that I have no time to ask you why this thing has happened. I can only see that it has been done. But for you, it is not too late. For me, it always was. I never knew what I had done till I had gone too far, till I had linked another life

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with mine—made another man miserable. I was no longer free. I could not go back.'

'It is the same with me,' said Alethea. 'I too must think of another life. I have to choose between Nicholas and Hans.'

'Between Nicholas and Hans. Who are they?'

'My husband and my son.'

Lady Uffcote was unprepared for this reply. For a moment it baffled her. Then she went on.

'Listen to me, I beg. For years I have been out of the world, and I little thought I should again intervene in its affairs. But when I heard that Lady Roxerby was here, that she was a young woman, alone, unhappy, and without her husband, I thought that the knowledge of my failure might save unhappiness for you. I know the Roxerbys. I understand their natures now as I never did when I thought I knew them best. They are men who cannot change. What they are, they will be. Love lasts with them for a lifetime, and if it breaks, they are broken too. Even then, it is not the end. They live on, broken men with broken hearts.'

'I can't help it. I can't do anything,' Alethea sobbed. 'What has parted us is something far beyond the control of our two selves.'

'I don't ask what has happened,' Lady Uffcote said. 'I can only speak of my own life. I have been very unhappy, and I have caused great un-

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happiness. What I did cannot be cancelled. I left two men who loved me. They were both Roxerbys, and I broke their hearts. You tell me I do not know the extent of the harm I did. Then I can plead with you all the more. Do not do as I did. Whatever may be your difficulties, go back to your husband. It is your only hope, and his. When I speak of him, I think of his grandfather who loved me, and whom I loved.'

Lady Uffcote had risen from her chair, and was standing with her hands stretched out. As she said her last words, her ghastly face was flooded miraculously with youth. For a moment, Alethea saw what Dulcibella Cheverell must have been. It was a vision of exquisite charm. Then the old woman sank back into her chair, her eyes glazed and dead in their dark sockets.

Alethea leapt to her feet and ran out of the house.

CHAPTER XIII

COUNTRESS FRIEDENBACH feared that her husband had after all been right (as husbands sometimes are) when he advised her not to insist upon Alethea's going, against her will, to see Lady Uffcote. The effect of the visit seemed disastrous. Alethea came back in a completely hysterical state. She had certainly been roused from her state of torpor, but it was a change for the worse.

And then, the next morning, came the news that Lady Uffcote had died of heart failure the evening before. The Count did his best to convince his wife that this event need not be laid at her door, but she remained persuaded that it was Alethea's visit which had killed the old lady. Still, it was not possible altogether to regret that Lady Uffcote's long unhappy life had at last come to its end, and the living problem which faced Countess Friedenbach, was the problem of Alethea. She could not think how to deal with this, though she knew that she was responsible for its new phase.

The visit to Lady Uffcote had ended for Alethea her weeks of calm beatitude. As Countess Friedenbach had intended, it had brought back

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the past into her consciousness, and the result seemed to be fatal. She could not sleep: she ate nothing. There were no more of those long peaceful days in the meadows, when she had been content to lie on her back and watch Hans playing about, for now she could not be still. She moved restlessly from room to room, looking out of a window, turning over the pages of a book which lay on the table, picking up her knitting and throwing it down, or even merely twisting a piece of wool round and round her fingers. Countess Friedenbach watched her for a day or two, and then she decided that Alethea could never be at peace until she had faced, fairly and squarely, the trouble which she was trying to keep out of her mind. Tante Helena was not the woman to force a confidence. She knew how to respect the reticence of her friends, but she looked upon Alethea as an invalid, and she treated her accordingly. Stifling the natural sympathy which made her understand a desire to be left alone, she resolved to force Alethea to ease herself of her misery by talking about it.

She found her niece sitting in the verandah which ran round the house, presumably watching Hans, who was playing in the garden; but actually engrossed in tying knots in a piece of string and then untying them.

Tante Helena sat down beside her, feeling very

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nervous. Hitherto she had had no inkling of the reasons which had driven Alethea from England. Her only justification in forcing a confidence would be in her power to help, and she was aware that the problem might be beyond her. She took her courage in her two hands, and broke the silence with which Alethea had received her.

'Darling,' she said, 'I want you to trust me. When you first came, I think this place gave you a sense of peace: it was a place of sanctuary, a city of refuge for you. But now I see your trouble has come back, and I want you to make a sanctuary not of my house, but of myself. Tell me what is wrong. I see it is too much for you to face alone, and I must be allowed to share it with you, and to help you.'

'No one can help,' said Alethea.

'I will never believe that. I know it is not true. Listen Alethea, I am very strong and I love you very much. Take my strength and my love to be yours. Use them as your own.'

Tante Helena's voice did not betray her real trepidation. Inwardly she felt none of the confidence which she professed. Wise woman as she was, she knew that there are knots in human life which are beyond human wisdom to untie. She looked at Alethea's finger nails, torn and jagged over their piece of string, and she wondered whether her own enterprise would end as badly.

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Alethea put these fears into words.

'Dear Tante Helena,' she said, 'if anyone could help me it would be you. When I came here, I showed you that I thought so, didn't I? But now I know that all that you can do for me—all that anyone can do for me—is to give me an asylum.'

She laughed drearily.

'What a name for my city of refuge!' said Tante Helena, trying to respond to Alethea's grim attempt at a joke.

Both women were silent. Alethea stared across the garden, to where Hans was sprawling about on the grass, kicking his legs, and revelling in the sunshine. Though she was looking at him, she evidently did not see him, for no reflection of his gaiety came into her face. Countess Friedenbach watched her, and felt hopeless.

'I see, of course,' she said at last, 'that you came here because you wanted to be let alone to think. But hasn't the time come when you have gone as far as your unaided thoughts will take you? Don't you want to talk your conclusions over with a friend?'

'I haven't thought about it at all,' said Alethea. Tante Helena laughed.

'I believe you my dear. So wise of you. You wanted a rest. But I see that what is troubling you now is the fact that some time you *will* have to think about it.'

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'I don't know what to do,' was all Alethea said.

'I shall tell you,' Tante Helena went on. 'In England you came up against some trouble which you and Nicholas could not agree to face together. You thought it best to part for a while, and each has tried to get round it alone. Has not the time come when you and he . . .'

'No. It hasn't,' said Alethea quickly. 'It never can.'

'I have had two husbands,' Tante Helena said calmly, 'so I know twice as much of marriage as a woman who has only had one. I have learnt that when two lives are so intimately linked as they are by marriage, each becomes more complicated, more dangerous, and more fatal, than it was when alone. Not less so. But I have also learnt that in facing those risks together (and not always side by side—sometimes in opposition to each other) the true happiness of marriage is reached. Love is a more permanent thing than friction.'

'I have only been married once,' said Alethea, 'so I can only agree to half of your argument.'

'And which half?'

'The first. Marriage is complicated, dangerous, and fatal.'

She tried, by another grim smile, to soften the cynicism of her answer.

'You have only had one half as yet. Be patient,

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and you will see that the second is as true as the first.'

'*Patient!*' Alethea exclaimed, impatiently.

'Yes, it sounds a dull word, and the end of romance. In truth it is the road from one romance to another.'

'There is no romance in what has happened to us. It is a very deep sorrow. It is . . . connected with Hans.'

Alethea's voice shook.

'I guessed that might be possible. But need this be altogether a sorrow? Is he not the joy of your life?'

'To me. Here. Yes. My only joy. But for Nicholas he is nothing but a curse. He hates him.'

Tears ran down her cheeks.

'Poor Nicholas! How terribly miserable he must be. Can't you go back to show him the happiness you have found in your darling little boy?'

'I don't want to go back. I can never go. Nicholas has made me hate him.'

'Can you hate him enough to wish that his life shall be always unhappy? No, Alethea, you don't want that.'

'It is the sight of Hans that he hates. It's that which makes him miserable. If we stay away he will forget that he has a son.'

'But can he forget that he has a wife?'

An answer rang in Alethea's ears, and it

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was Lady Uffcote's voice that she heard.

'The Roxerbys are men who cannot change . . . Love lasts with them for a lifetime, and if it breaks, they are broken too. . . . Then they live on, broken men with broken hearts.'

She fought against listening.

'He has made me despise him.'

'Don't despise him because you have seen him suffer. Men are not so brave as women. Things are harder for them to bear. He trusted you when he betrayed his weakness to you.'

'Trusted me?' Alethea broke out, in a passion of bitterness. 'He never trusted me at all. He was dishonourable, untrue, false.'

She burst into sobs.

'Tell me all,' said Tante Helena, in tones of great tenderness. But she could not help crying too. This unexplained agony tore her heart.

And then Alethea told her everything. Once she had begun to speak, she could not stop. The stream of words flowed on, sometimes quite incoherent, and sometimes poignantly simple and tragic. She told her story just as it had happened: how Nicholas had from the first treated the deformity of their child as something which must divide them; how mercilessly he had held her responsible for it; how unjust he had been to the Warrens. And when she came to her last day at

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Brokeyates, and told of the terrible scene with Mrs. Roxerby, every word of that fatal interview surged back into her mind. They came from her now, as she repeated them, like the harsh strokes of a hammer ringing upon iron.

'And then I knew what he was,' she said. 'What he had been all along. He had concealed this from me, and had tortured me by telling me that *I* was the cause of my poor little darling's misfortune. He punished those unhappy Warrens when they had absolutely nothing to do with it. And all the time he knew about his own mother. Dishonourable! Cruel! Unforgivable!'

Her piteous misery had changed to vibrating anger.

'What could ever make it better?' she exclaimed. 'There's no way out of it with such a man as that.'

For some minutes, Tante Helena was quite unable to speak, and she made no effort to check Alethea's sobs. She was sobbing herself. When at last she spoke, she said:

'And yet I see no other way.'

'No other way than what?'

'No other way than with that man, that terribly unhappy man.'

'No, no, I can't,' said Alethea. The anger had gone out of her voice. It only sounded very wretched.

'Yet he is your husband.'

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'He *was*. But now . . . I have given my life altogether to Hans.'

'Darling Alethea, let us think it out together. What is the root of all this misery? It is not in Hans. Exquisite little thing, he can never be like other people, but it is not that which breaks your heart. No, it is the thought of Nicholas. You cannot mend your life until you can mend his.'

'I cannot do it,' said Alethea. 'I couldn't if I wanted to. And I don't even want to.'

'Yet it is far worse for him than for you.'

'O, no.'

'Indeed it is. You have your child. He has . . . his mother.'

Alethea shuddered. 'He hasn't got her. She has gone away.'

'She can never go away, unless you can banish her from his mind. Don't you understand, Alethea, that it is she who has poisoned his life? He grew up, haunted by the thought of what she was. It ate into him, making him sceptical about happiness, and afraid of the world. Then he married you, and he thought his mother could pass out of his life. The sight of Hans showed him that she had followed him with a curse. And when he seized upon the idea that the Warren child might be at the root of it, I think it was *himself* whom he was trying to convince. He clutched at anything to make him believe that the thing

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wasn't incurably in his blood. It was his own inheritance which tortured him, and it is torturing him to-day.'

'He ought to have told me about it,' said Alethea.

'Pity him because he couldn't. A normal person cannot enter into the distorted point of view of a mind so warped from the first. He has brooded upon his mother's deformity till he has magnified it into something hideous and disgraceful.'

'It is that, without any magnifying.'

'Possibly. She sounds deformed in spirit as well as in body. And Nicholas is left with the thought of that, while you are here with Hans. Alethea, you must go and help him out of it.'

'How can I?'

'By your love for him.'

'It is over.'

'Then by the fact that you are his wife.'

'I can't change the fact of Hans being as he is, and that is the cause of our misery.'

'No Alethea, that I will never believe, and you know that it isn't true. Hans is not the trouble. Look at him now, what an angel he is! Nicholas is haunted by an evil spirit which makes him see Hans as only a reminder of a miserable past. That evil spirit is still with him at Brokeyates. It must be driven out. You are its only exorcist.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'Go back to Nicholas.'

CHAPTER XIV

THIS conversation was shattering both to Alethea and to Countess Friedenbach, and yet, when it was over, Alethea, at any rate, felt almost calm. In spite of her having declared that no one could help her, it was a relief to have put upon Tante Helena some of the responsibility for judging what should be done. And in the next few days, they came to talk over Alethea's troubles almost as if they related to a stranger. The Countess did not hurry Alethea into any immediate action: her present aim was gradually to accustom her to the idea that there was no doubt that she was some day going back to Brokeyates.

Tante Helena succeeded in making Alethea sorry for her husband. Till now, she had never realized his feelings at all. She had thought of him only as an unreasonable tyrant. Now she began to wonder about his life in Australia, and to see what it must have been. He had grown up under that woman's roof. That venomous little creature was his mother. As a boy, he had probably been laughed at because he was the son of a dwarf. No wonder he had leapt at the chance of escape, and

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had desired above all things to cut himself off from his life in Australia. She remembered that before they were married, she had been drawn to him by what had seemed to her an appeal for pity which sometimes looked from his eyes. He was, after all, the wounded animal caught hopelessly in a trap, but could it be that she herself had joined in the heartless sport of stoning him there? Her love for him revived, born again from that pity which had always been a part of it. She knew now that Tante Helena was right. Nicholas must need her desperately, but how could she go back to him? If she took Hans back to Brokeyates, it would merely mean the reopening of the old wound; and yet, she could not leave the little boy behind. She was torn between these two opposing calls.

There was no doubt that to return to Nicholas was the more difficult of the two alternatives. Here, at Friedenbach, life must always be simplified. Conflict was shut away by the still horizon of the mountains. At Brokeyates she must find herself in the turmoil of her husband's stormy misery. Alethea told herself that the more difficult of the two courses must be the heroic one, the right one, the one to follow.

But what about Hans?

Tante Helena of course found the answer to this.

'Leave him with me for a time,' she said. 'The

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mountain air suits him. He thrives wonderfully here. Who knows, that if he stays here for a bit, he may not grow into a normal man? Many people have to make the sacrifice of parting for a while with a delicate child; and if you trust him with me, you can always run over here, every two or three weeks, to see how he is going on.'

It was a hard decision to make, but Alethea made it. She resolved to go back to England, leaving Hans at Friedenbach for the time.

Countess Friedenbach watched, in an agony of sympathy, the steps by which Alethea fought her way to her resolve. Her very face was changed by it. It grew older and sadder, and yet it had a new beauty. It was like the face of the Madonna in a *Pieta*—the face of a woman whose heart has known the piercing of a sword.

Then Alethea wrote a letter to Nicholas. More than three months had passed since she sent him that last note from Paris, and in that time, they had heard nothing of each other. Now, she could not think how to write. It seemed to her that the wording of her letter was very important. A great deal hung upon it. It was not a letter to be written in a hurry. She felt she was justified in taking a good deal of time over it, and until it had been written and sent, there could be no thought of her departure. She made many rough drafts, and those first attempts were very long letters. Alethea

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went into every aspect of the situation, and as she wrote and re-wrote, she found that she was building up Nicholas's case for him. She saw more and more clearly how much he must need her.

And after spending some days over these letters, she at last wrote only a few lines on a scrap of paper.

'Darling Nicholas,' she wrote.

'I have been here in the mountains with Tante Helena Friedenbach, and I am much better for the change. The mountain air is being so good for Hans that I shall leave him here for a while, and come home without him. I want to be with you. Do not write. I shall arrive almost as soon as this letter.

Alethea.'

Into the envelope, she put three or four little mountain flowers.

The letter was ready, but several more days passed before Alethea could bring herself to post it. When once it had gone, it would be too late to turn back. She had made up her mind that she must follow it immediately, for by now she had begun to fear that Nicholas might even forbid her to return. Perhaps he would refuse to forgive her for running away.

Those last days at Friedenbach were cruelly beautiful. Every day, Tante Helena drove Alethea and Hans into the mountains, and there they stayed for many hours, taking their luncheon with

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them, and building up a fire on which they boiled their coffee and hot milk. Hans scrambled about picking up sticks which he threw onto the fire. Alethea had taught him that it was dangerous to go too near, so he threw them from a very long way off, and they always fell far short of the flames. He gave loud boisterous laughs when Alethea picked them up and put them on for him, and then he sat down, and watched the fire very earnestly.

'Oh, Oh, pretty,' he said, as he looked at it.

Alethea silently watched him as he sat there, and then she shut her eyes and tried to hold the picture photographed on their lids. She wanted to carry it with her to England. Countess Friedenbach turned away. She felt like an eavesdropper.

One evening, after Alethea had put Hans to bed, she got up suddenly and left the house, alone. She walked to the village and posted her letter to Nicholas. She did not return to the drawing-room where Tante Helena was playing Bach: she went instead to her bedroom and spent the evening packing her clothes. There were very few of them, but it took her so long that the Friedenbachs saw no more of her that night. While she packed, Hans slept beside her, sometimes laughing over a happy dream.

The next day was the last.

They drove to the mountains directly after

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breakfast. Tante Helena had chosen a new and very delicious place for their picnic. It was a little green hollow among wooded hills. Large blue forget-me-nots grew on the banks of a small stream which was so shallow that the water played with the pebbles as if it had not made up its mind whether it would flow over them, or slip round them. It rang like tiny bells shrilly pitched. The edge of the wood was crimson with mountain strawberries, which had grown large and juicy in the shade. Tante Helena and Alethea began to pick a basketful for luncheon, while Hans lay on his stomach by the stream, and played with the pebbles. He loved to feel the cool water come up against his fingers, and to make it throw up little fountains which splashed his face.

Suddenly Countess Friedenbach touched Alethea on the shoulder.

‘Look!’ she whispered.

A wild doe had brought her fawn to drink at the stream, and the two graceful creatures were standing on the opposite bank, looking at Hans with gentle friendly eyes.

‘Will they hurt him?’ Alethea whispered, all anxiety.

‘No. They are the gentlest of animals. If he even moves, they will canter away.’

They were evidently not at all afraid of Hans, who lay still, his chin resting upon his hands,

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watching as they drank. Then the doe, planting her feet with great delicacy and elegance, stepped daintily across the stream, while her fawn trotted at her heels, slipping about among the pebbles. They both came and stood beside Hans, who stretched out his tiny hand, and patted the baby animal. The mother put down her head and licked his hair as he did this. Suddenly a distant noise startled the nervous creatures, and the doe and her fawn went springing away, spinning from rock to rock, while Hans stood up and spread his hands out wide as he called to them to come back. The scene passed in a very few moments, and when it had passed, it seemed incredible.

‘I have never seen a doe with a fawn approach a human being,’ said Tante Helena. ‘There is no doubt that Hans must be a fairy.’

Hans ran towards them, calling to Alethea to come with him in pursuit of his friends, and off they went, hand in hand. They crept cautiously through the trees, with exaggerated tip-toeing on the part of Hans, who peered under the leaves of even the smallest plants, as if he thought the deer might have hidden themselves there. He infected Alethea with his excitement, his sense of mystery, and his confidence that the doe and her fawn were waiting for them in every dappled shadow which fell across the path.

It was a magic morning, and although they

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came upon no trace of the deer, yet they found many other things to delight Hans. Birds hopped about them, and squirrels raced up the tree-trunks, to peep mischievously at them from just out of sight. They found a place where the stream had become a little pool, and this was quite full of minnows. Hans spent a long time trying to catch one in his hands. Last of all, they came upon a stray pig, whose clumsy shape and awkward movements were extremely amusing to Hans. He threw himself back, against the trunk of a tree, in an absurd attitude of mockery, and he laughed loudly as he pointed at the pig, who seemed offended, and trotted away.

It was very pretty to hear the little boy imitate the cooing of the wood-pigeons, and this he did so perfectly that they flew about round him, looking for the source of the soft flute-like notes.

These pictures of Hans on that last day fell upon Alethea's heart with the sad beauty of leaves falling from the trees. They lay where they fell, to be stirred in the coming weeks by the circling breezes of an unresting memory. She could not take her eyes from him, and his every movement seemed to her more winning than ever before. Tante Helena left them alone, and they wandered about all the rest of the morning, Hans altogether unconscious of the agony which Alethea held in her breast. A dog would have known, but not a child.

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They joined Countess Friedenbach for luncheon, and feasted on strawberries and cream, and then Hans lay down on the grass and went to sleep. Alethea moved his head onto her lap, and she sat looking down at him. Tante Helena moved away. She could not be a spectator of Alethea's suffering. It was too intimate.

The train left at nine o'clock, and when Alethea had undressed Hans, she sat down as usual by his bed to watch him till he went to sleep. Generally, he was full of little tricks to keep her there, and was bent on staying awake as long as possible, to play with his mother. To-night, when she was over-ready to be indulgent, he was tired after the long day in the mountain air, and he seemed to be asleep in a few moments. She kissed him, and went downstairs. She felt suddenly very tired.

The Count went with her to the station, as Alethea had asked Tante Helena not to leave the house for fear that Hans might wake up. After all, it was better to be with someone like the Count. He was a kind man, entirely without imagination. He had no comprehension of the conflict which was tearing Alethea's soul. He took it for granted that she was leaving Friedenbach because she wanted to go back to England, and he was unaware of her battle between rights and wrongs, duties and desires, love and love. For the Count, the world was a simple place, in which things

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were either bad or good, desirable or unpleasant. He came to the station to make sure that Alethea had a comfortable carriage, and to arrange, as far as possible, that she should have no trouble at the Custom House. He was so occupied over these concerns, that he forced Alethea to consider them too. Nothing could equal his kindness, and she was thankful that he never thought of being kind where she was really bruised. It was one of those occasions when the most welcome companion is an entirely dense one.

CHAPTER XV

THE JULY twilight was heavy with the sleepy scent of hay, when Alethea stepped out of the train onto the platform of the little station she had left so hurriedly nearly four months earlier. She was tired and cramped after her two days' journey and all initiative seemed to have been crushed out of her by heat, dust, and fatigue. When she thought of Nicholas, he seemed an antagonistic stranger awaiting her in a mood which she had no means of forecasting. They had not met since she had left him with his mother when he had told her to fetch Hans, and now that afternoon seemed to have passed in a completely other life. She could not guess what her husband had thought of her going away, nor how he would receive her on her return. She looked up and down the platform. Would he be there? He was not. Only the old porter, whom she had known all her life. She saw the rather dapper station master, a newer inhabitant, put down his waterpot in his garden, and hurry into his coat, as he swung across the line in the wake of the train.

Till that moment, Alethea had not thought how

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much her unexplained disappearance must have made the village gossips talk, and now she recoiled from the idea. She felt very shy and so she looked very haughty, as she asked whether the motor had been sent to meet her. She could not see it, and this gave her an increased sense of chill. Nicholas was either away from home, or he had ignored the telegram she had sent, telling him of the hour of her arrival. She was relieved when she was told that the motor *was* waiting for her, but when she came out of the station, she hardly recognized the rather dilapidated old car which stood in the road. It was one which had long been degraded to the position of carrying the laundry baskets, and the garden produce. It was driven by an under-gardener.

Her reception crushed her. It seemed to suggest that she was no longer the mistress of the house she had deserted.

Old Tom, the porter, put her case on the seat at her side, saying as he did so:

'Pleased to see you home my lady, I'm sure.'

Alethea smiled faintly in recognition of this welcome, which jarred upon her. She thought that the man had no business to seem aware that she had been away.

Evans, the under-gardener, touched his hat, and said nothing. Alethea thought that at least he knew how to behave.

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They drove through the Park, which she thought looked untidy and ragged. The drive wanted weeding, and the grass edges had not been clipped. As they approached the house the appearance of desertion was even more marked. Shutters were shut in most of the rooms, giving the house a blank repellent aspect.

When the motor pulled up at the door, no butler came to open it, and Alethea felt obliged to ask Evans, as she got out of the motor, whether Sir Nicholas was at home or not.

'I think so, my lady,' was his non-committal reply, as he drove away with the luggage to the back door. Alethea walked up the steps alone, and went into the house, feeling completely unwelcome. Was this her home-coming?

Hardly had she shut the door behind her, when a figure emerged from the shadows. Before she saw who it was, she found that she was in her husband's arms.

They could neither of them speak, but Nicholas held her so closely, and kissed her so fiercely, that no words were needed to assure her that he wanted her back. She could do nothing but cling to him, crying weakly, and she had resolved to be so strong and sensible when she got home!

Holding her by both hands, Nicholas led her into the dining-room.

'You must be longing for food,' he said. These

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were the first words which had passed between them.

'I don't know that I'm very hungry, but some soup would be most refreshing.'

'I hope you'll find it all right,' said Nicholas doubtfully, as he opened the tureen and stirred the soup with the ladle. Alethea looked round the room, and appreciated her husband's tact in having no servants to wait upon them.

The soup was on the sideboard, and a joint of cold mutton and a dish of strawberries stood on the table. It was obviously a traveller's meal, left on the table, with no one to serve it. None of the usual glass and silver could be seen; only the necessary plates, and beside each place was a tumbler. They were not expected to drink wine.

Alethea stood by Nicholas and rested her hand on his shoulder, as he helped her to some rather greasy soup.

'The kitchen maid,' she thought. 'I suppose Mrs. Hammett is out.'

They were both very shy, and could think of nothing to say. The meal was a great resource, and they offered each other bread, and salad, and water. Once, when Nicholas passed behind her on his way to the sideboard, he kissed the back of her neck. She smiled, and rested her head against him.

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'I expect you really would have liked a wash,' he said.

'I prefer a meal,' she answered. 'But do I look very dirty and travel-stained?'

'Not in my eyes,' was his reply.

When they had finished supper, they went out onto the terrace. She stood, her hand on his arm, and they gazed at the garden together. It was by now almost dark, and the scent of the honeysuckle laid hold of them, drawing them back into the memory of other summer nights in the same place.

They both shrank from disturbing the peace of the evening, and by a tacit agreement, they avoided words or explanations. But they held close to each other.

'I didn't come to the station,' he said at last. 'I thought that the spectacle of our meeting would be too interesting a scene for the station people.'

'I'm sorry,' she said.

'That they missed their show?'

'That it reached the point of being one.'

He kissed the tips of her fingers.

'I must go and see Portia,' she said.

'She wanted to stay up, but I sent her to bed, and she was asleep long before you arrived.'

They went into the house, and Alethea turned towards the nursery staircase.

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'Not that way,' said Nicholas. 'I have moved her to our part of the house.'

She was touched by this evidence of his loneliness.

After the weeks Alethea had spent alone with Hans, Portia struck her as an abnormally large child, when she saw her lying asleep. She realized with a blush that her daughter had practically ceased to exist for her since she had been in Bavaria. She had almost forgotten her. Now she felt proud of her beauty, and she was aware of that sense of pathos which sometimes invests a sleeping child. She was shaken by a rush of tenderness, as she kissed the little face.

Portia turned over and smiled. Her eyelids quivered.

'She knows you are here,' Nicholas whispered.

'More strawberries,' Portia muttered, as she settled down again to sleep.

Alethea laughed more spontaneously than she had laughed for a long time.

'She is dreaming of something much sweeter than me,' she said.

'I expect she smelt strawberries on your hands,' said Nicholas.

Alethea had not realized how tired she was, but as they left the nursery, her foot stumbled, and she almost fell.

'You are quite worn out,' Nicholas exclaimed.

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'You ought to be in bed. We won't talk till to-morrow.'

Alethea knew that she had come to the end of her strength, and she thought that she was too tired to sleep. Instead, she fell asleep the moment she got into bed, and the complete oblivion of the night prepared her to face the ordeals of the morning. For there was much to be faced.

Not until she came out of her bedroom in the morning, did she begin to see the meaning of the changes in Brokeyates. The house seemed only half awake. It had the unfriendly air of a place given up to dust-sheets. No housemaid appeared to have swept in the long gallery which ran the length of the first floor, and the windows at its two ends were still shuttered. She went to the gay little room looking upon the garden, where she and Nicholas had always breakfasted in the summer, and she found that the door was locked. She opened it, and looked in. It was given up to cobwebs. She found Nicholas in the dining-room. Once more, there was no silver on the table. A copper kettle spat above an earthenware teapot.

'I looked for you in the breakfast room,' she said.

'I haven't used that this year,' he answered. 'After breakfast, we must talk.'

She shrank from the idea. It was true that she had not come home to what she had most

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dreaded, for she and Nicholas still loved each other. They had known that last night. They had found themselves far nearer to each other than they had been since the birth of Hans. She herself had been amazed at her own feelings, for there had been times in Bavaria when she had believed that her love for Nicholas was utterly dead. When she saw him again, she had been aware of nothing but the old tender passion. Nicholas was her man. She loved him, and she knew that he loved her.

Still, she realized that Tante Helena had been right when she said that it was possible for two people who really loved each other, yet to find themselves actually in opposition. And on the question of the attitude of Nicholas towards Hans, she felt that they could not agree. She dreaded the thought of their speaking about that, and yet she knew that it must come.

Nicholas was reading his letters, and she watched him as she had often watched him before. She remembered Lady Uffcote's words: '*The Roxerbys are men who cannot change.*' It was true of Nicholas. He had not changed in his love for her, in spite of all that had happened. Must his feelings for Hans be equally unchangeable?

Alethea clung to the hope that her child might not be incurably a dwarf. She still believed it possible for him to grow into a normal man. But even if this could never be, she recognized in Hans

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a disposition rare enough to surmount physical disabilities, however pitiable. And she knew that he must always possess something of that unearthly beauty which had belonged to him from his birth. She meditated as to how she could bring this home to her husband, and she saw how difficult it must be. He had obstinately refused to look at his son, and he had never really known what the child was like. Now Alethea understood that he saw Hans in his mind, as a deformity like his own mother. How could she set to work to drive out such an impression? It would be, as Tante Helena had called it, an act of exorcism.

When breakfast was over they went to the library, the room which Nicholas had always used as a sitting-room. They were both tongue-tied in face of the explanations which lay before them. Alethea fumbled in her mind seeking for the right words in which to tell Nicholas that she was sorry she had gone away when he was so unhappy; but before she could find them, he began to speak.

'Dear Alethea,' he said. 'When I heard you were coming back, I knew that you had found it possible to forgive me for the frightful things I said and did when I drove you out of this house. You must have seen then what I was—what I can be—a cad and a maniac. I thought you would never be able to pardon it, but you have. How can I thank you?'

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She tried to silence him, taking his hand, and caressing it.

'Let us forget that day, Nicholas. We neither of us knew what we were doing.'

'But the wrong which I did you before was far more unpardonable—an inexpressible sin.'

'Dear Nicholas, when I learnt the secret of your hidden misery, I learnt what made you feel as you did about Hans.'

Her voice shook.

He interrupted her.

'I am going further back than that,' he said. 'I ought never to have asked you to be my wife. I should not have married at all. That I did. It cannot be undone or forgiven.'

'Nicholas dear, what nonsense! I should never have forgiven you if you hadn't!'

She tried to smile, and to make him smile.

'It was stupidity on my part, rather than malice,' he said.

'Malice?' She repeated the word.

'I was fool enough to think', he went on, 'that this curse was a thing outside myself, something that was over and done with when I turned my back on Australia. I thought it could never follow me here.'

'But my dear it was better for us both that I should see your mother. We must always have been apart while I was ignorant of what mattered

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so terribly to you. I knew that you were keeping me in some way outside your life, and that was really why we were so unhappy all that time. Agonizing as that day was at the time, I shall be glad of it, if you will only feel that though you couldn't tell me about your mother, now I know, and that makes it all right.'

'You don't yet understand what I mean. I am not thinking of my having kept this secret from you, and so appearing not to trust you. That was bad enough. But I ought not to have married. I am that woman's son, I have her blood in me. I am a tainted man.'

The despair in his face filled her eyes with tears.

'Hans,' she said. 'But Hans is not like . . .'

He stopped her.

'I am not thinking of Hans. I don't want to think of him. I am speaking of myself.'

'Of yourself?' she said, puzzled.

'Yes Alethea, of myself. Dwarf's blood is bad blood, and I have it in my veins. You wouldn't guess it, would you, to look at me? But now I know that it is that which has always been wrong with me. It makes me hate the world, and it makes me always afraid of my fellow men. Yes, I know you will say that people think me prouder than other people, and think that I am only too ready to defy them; but that is only to hide my secret fear. When I was at school, the boys used to

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laugh at me about my mother. It made me hate her and them. Then I came over here, and I thought I was free of it all. But no. I am not. I *must* hate anyone or anything that reminds me of it. The hatred is stronger than I am myself.'

She knew what he meant. She knew that, now, he *was* thinking of Hans. She was overwhelmed by the hopelessness of the situation.

Suddenly he broke into sobs, and she felt for him the utter humiliation which she knew he suffered when he cried before her.

'Alethea, be sorry for me. You know it all now. Save me from myself. Try to love me still, though you know that I have the soul of a dwarf. It means that I shall always be a coward.'

She took his hand.

'If you are a coward,' she said, 'you are also a very brave man, for you can look your cowardice in the face, and that is the most frightening thing in the world. But now, having once faced it, don't look at it any more. If you do, it will drag you down. Look at me Nicholas. You see how I have to look up at you. You are no dwarf. All that horror is left in Australia. You thought that you were going to forget it, and you can. You must.'

'Alethea, it is no use. I am caught in a trap. I can't get out. I'm tied up in it, for it is myself. I must stay in it till I die.'

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His eyes flamed with the torture she seemed always to have known.

'I shall not let you speak of it again,' she said. 'What you have said makes no difference to me. The person who is caught in a trap naturally thinks that his trap is the whole world. He can't see beyond it. But if someone opens the cage for him and lets him out, he sees that the world is bigger, and less cruel than he thought. I shall open your trap for you. I am here to set you free.'

'Alethea, I worship you,' he said. 'But I know that I must go on making you miserable. I can't help it, and now you know why. There are things I cannot do, and you must go on forgiving me, for I have told you that I am a coward.'

Her heart sank, for she knew what he meant. He was trying to tell her that he could never face the sight of Hans, for that must always remind him of his curse.

'You won't always be a coward,' she said. But she felt hopeless.

CHAPTER XVI

IT TOOK Alethea several days to discover the extent of the changes which Nicholas had made at Brokeyates while she was away; and she was completely unprepared for them. It was true that she had been present when he had so violently declared that he would never touch another penny which came from Australia; but that afternoon she had thought of nothing but the threat to Hans. Even if she had heard what was said about the money, she would not have taken in all that it implied. Who could have foreseen that the fatal half hour which Mrs. Roxerby spent in her son's house was to result in a complete revolution in his mode of life in it? After she went away, Alethea had certainly never given another thought to the possible consequences of her husband's determination to cut himself off completely from all connection with Australia.

Now she found that the motor car which had met her at the station was the only car which Nicholas still possessed; while the man who had driven it was the only man he employed, except the labourers on the farm. It was no wonder that

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she had thought the park untidy and neglected, for no one had touched it since the early spring. The closed shutters, which that night had given to the house so forbidding an aspect, meant that most of the rooms were shut up; and in the parts which were still occupied, Nicholas and Portia were living in what seemed to Alethea quite unnecessary squalor. The very capable servants whom she had left at Brokeyates had been replaced by two or three raw girls from neighbouring villages. They were quite untrained and knew nothing of their work. The house was dirty, and the cooking bad.

Colonel Bracton had not been well off, and Alethea had all her life kept house upon a small income; but Radway had never known the discomforts which Nicholas had accepted as being the inevitable lot of a poor man. At first Alethea did not know how to begin putting things to rights, for economy is difficult in a house designed for luxury; and the servants whom Nicholas had engaged resented the orders of a mistress of whose existence they had hardly been aware. They were sulky and disobliging, and she found that she must get rid of them all, and make a fresh start.

This meant that her first few months at home were full of unexpected difficulties. Friedenbach seemed a long way off, and the prospect of going back there looked very remote. Alethea could not

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think how she was to find either the time or the money for the frequent visits to Bavaria which she had promised herself.

Her longing to be there was sometimes more than she could bear, and yet she could never speak of it to Nicholas. She saw that in some ways he was almost a madman, and she treated him as such. His mania centred round the thought of Hans, and therefore the child's name could not be spoken in his presence. He checked the least reference to his son by that miserable look in his eyes which Alethea had learnt to dread.

Silently he drove in upon her two assumptions which were in future to underlie their existence. He insisted that she should recognize that to see or to speak of Hans must necessarily remind him of his mother, and so bring back into his life all that which had poisoned his youth. And secondly he affected to be convinced by Alethea's own letter to him written from Friedenbach, saying that the place suited Hans, and that his best hope of health lay in his remaining there. There was something uncanny in the way in which he impressed these decrees upon Alethea, when the subject of Hans was never mentioned between them. It was something which they both knew without words.

Nicholas was one of those men who can only look in one direction, and who are blind to anything which is not directly in their line of sight.

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He was honestly unaware of Alethea's feelings. He adored his wife, and would have been horrified at the suggestion that he was acting selfishly towards her; but it seemed to him established that there were certain things which he could not be expected to bear. He did not see that, because of this, Alethea was expected to bear a great deal.

Alethea realized that she was nearer to Nicholas than she had ever been. There was something touching in the way in which he leant upon her now that he knew that there were no secrets between them. She found that she was becoming as sensitive as he was himself, to any chance remark which could possibly be construed into an allusion to dwarfs. This was not because, like Nicholas, she suspected the speakers of wilfully shooting a barbed arrow in his direction; but because she knew that he would suspect this, and that nothing would disabuse him of the idea. He thought Alethea almost cruel when she tried to reassure him. He hugged his suspicions of his neighbours, and would not believe her when she told him that as they none of them knew that his mother was a dwarf, they couldn't possibly be gibing at him about it. Alethea began to think that there had been something in what he said when he had averred that the 'dwarf's blood' in his veins had given him the mind of a dwarf in his finely built body.

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When she compared his disposition with the radiant nature of his little son, she told herself that it was far happier to be outwardly a dwarf than to grow up with this inner warping of the mind.

Portia too was something of a care to Alethea. Nicholas had sent away her very expensive nurse, and the young girl whom he had engaged to succeed her, had allowed the child to get completely out of hand. She was a wilful little thing, and seemed to have not much affection in her nature. Alethea wondered whether the little girl had not inherited some of those mental qualities which had made Nicholas so unhappy a man. If so, they influenced her in an entirely opposite way. Like her father, she was an egoist, and was very much affected by what people thought of her. But, unlike him, she only listened to what was agreeable to her. She was as vain as her father was proud, and even at the age of three, she was well aware that she was pretty. More than any thing, she enjoyed being taken to see some village woman, who would say what a pretty little lady she was, and how tall for her age, or would admire her blue eyes, and her pink sash.

Portia was a most determined young person. She always knew what she wanted, and she generally knew too how to get possession of it; but it seemed to Alethea that she always wanted uninteresting things. She had none of the imagina-

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tion which Hans, long before he could speak, had succeeded in showing that he possessed. He had always responded so quickly to the stories told him by his mother, and after her months with him in Bavaria, it was crushing to come back to Portia's matter-of-fact mind. Alethea showed her pictures and told her about the Sleeping Beauty and Jack and the Beanstalk. Portia thought these fairy stories merely silly, and she looked at her mother with a superior air, as if she wondered how anyone could attend to such nonsense. She liked facts; and was really interested in learning how bananas were brought from Jamaica to England; how straw hats were made at Luton; and whether the women in Constantinople slept on iron bedsteads or not. Alethea found it difficult to keep her daughter supplied with all the information she desired on these and kindred topics.

In many ways, she was happy. She did not mind being poor, and in fact she really enjoyed the contact with household affairs from which she had hitherto been debarred by her staff of excellent servants. As there was now only one housemaid, Alethea took charge herself of the wood panelling and the fine old furniture, and she prided herself on keeping it in perfect condition. She no longer allowed the unused corridors to vaunt their shuttered and melancholy darkness before the eyes of everyone who came upstairs;

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but she shut them out of sight with some very valuable old lacquer screens which she carried up from the picture gallery.

Nicholas was as busy as his wife, and he too enjoyed his life. He was always in the Park, clearing away thistles and nettles, lopping off dead branches, and making bonfires of the rubbish. He worked hard in the garden too, and he and Alethea assured themselves that no one could guess that they had parted with the six or seven men whom they used to employ in the flower garden.

So time went on, and Alethea found that more than three months had gone before she could find it at all possible to go back to Friedenbach. She heard from Tante Helena two or three times a week, and the news of Hans was always good. He was well and happy. Alethea found to her shame that she was almost hurt by this continued good news. Hans was so happy without her: she was becoming unnecessary to him. Sometimes she felt a fierce jealousy against Tante Helena. It was unfair that another woman should rob the mother of the joy of those passing months of ever-changing child life.

In September, Alethea saw that it was becoming more possible for her to go away. The household was now working smoothly in a routine which might go on without her for a time. The garden made less demands, so that Nicholas could do

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without her there for a while. But she did not know how to frame the words which would tell him that she was going to Bavaria. She really feared him where Hans was concerned, and now, not only was the name of Hans, but the name of Bavaria too, among the subjects which were taboo between them. When she tried to say she was going away, her heart beat furiously, and her tongue dried in her mouth.

So she made her arrangements, and said nothing about them to Nicholas till the day before she meant to leave. Then she told him, as calmly as she could, that she must be away for a week, as she was obliged to see Countess Friedenbach about various arrangements for the child, his winter clothes, and so on. She found that she was actually making excuses for going to see her own child, and this made her ashamed, but she could not treat Nicholas as a normal man.

She saw the dark flush come under his skin, and she knew that he was controlling his feelings, but he tried to accept the news that she was going away, as if it was an every-day matter. She knew he hated to be looked upon as an autocrat, and therefore he would make no actual objection to her plans; but it was obvious that he thought she was trying him rather unfairly. Think as he might, Alethea had made up her mind. She left for Bavaria the next morning.

CHAPTER XVII

IT WAS a marvel to be back again at Friedenbach, and to find the wide circle of the valley still ringed round with the unchanging peace which flowed down from the mountain summits. Alethea felt herself plunged into another element.

Tante Helena and Hans were waiting for her at the door, and it was with a chill at the heart that Alethea saw that the little boy was shy of her when he first saw her. He held on to Tante Helena's hand, looking very demure, and smiling very sweetly though rather artificially. As she ate her breakfast, he stood a little way off, and peeped at her round the corner of a chair. Alethea felt that she had lost him for ever. But in less than an hour, he was as easy with her as if she had never gone away. He dragged her about by the hand, showing her all his new possessions—his goldfish, his new shoes, and the coloured pebbles which he had found in the stream. He quite ignored Tante Helena, and was anxious that the Friedenbachs should understand that Alethea was his property, and that they had no rights in her at all.

But that first half-hour had confirmed Alethea in

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an intention which had been at the back of her mind. She must take Hans away from Bavaria, and she herself must be cut off from what had come to exist in her mind as a hidden fairyland to which she held a key. It was however a key which she could use too seldom, as she lived too far from the lock into which it fitted. She knew by now that she could never be more than a very rare visitor to her son while the journey to see him took over two days. They must, in time, become strangers to each other, and this she could not contemplate.

And as she travelled across Europe, she had been realizing what it must mean to her if Hans should ever be ill. The thought that he would then be divided from her by those miles of railway seemed to stop the beating of her heart.

Yes. Hans must come to England; but where could he live? She saw that Brokeyates was impossible as yet, and indeed she saw very little prospect of Nicholas ever becoming normal enough to be willing to see his son living in his house.

She talked a great deal with Countess Friedenbach about her husband's obsession as to the dwarf's blood in his own veins.

'If he's right in thinking that he has got the mind, though not the body, of a dwarf (and I am beginning to agree with him) I don't see that there can be any hope. He will always have this an-

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tagonistic attitude towards the world,' she said.

'I don't believe a word of it,' Countess Friedenbach declared. 'It has nothing to do with anything born in him. It merely means that his mother was unkind to him when he was a child, and that his schoolfellows teased him about her when he was at school. It got on his nerves. He will forget it in time.'

'If you are right, it is not hopeless. But how can I tell that you *are* right? That you know more about Nicholas than he knows himself?'

'Because his theory is merely paralysing. It would mean that there was no scope for human effort, and that is against Nature. If we are human beings at all, and I really believe we are, there's no such thing as predestination where we are concerned.'

'You are more optimistic than the scientists.'

'Scientists? My dear, there's only one thing that the honest ones will agree upon, and that is, that as yet they know nothing at all about life. That's where their science stops, and where we come in.'

'Who do you mean by "we"?''

'Those of us who are up against life where it is most difficult.'

'But don't you believe in heredity?'

'Yes, I do believe in it, but that's all I can say about it. It seems impossible to forecast its vagaries. Look, for instance, at Nicholas and his

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mother and his son. Could there be three more different people? And yet, I suppose, he will say that they all have what he calls dwarf's blood. Well, if they have, it varies as much as any other kind of blood.'

When Tante Helena spoke, she made Alethea feel as if she was speaking out of a deep store of wisdom and knowledge; and whether this were true or not, she made an impossibility of the word impossibility.

She agreed with Alethea that Hans must go to England, for she saw that life would be too hard for the mother if she saw her child so seldom. It was very difficult to think of a home for him, and they went round and round this problem for a long time. Then, all at once, they both thought of the same person. Simultaneously the name came from each of their lips. *Miss Nash*. Of course. They stared at each other, convinced that this was an inspiration. There was no doubt about it. Miss Nash had been created to give a home to Hans. It was the vocation for which she had waited for forty years.

Miss Nash had been Alethea's governess—a small, fair woman, alert and sparkling, original and conscientious. She had always been devoted to Alethea, and had only had one complaint against her pupil—the fact that she was not a boy, for Miss Nash liked boys better than girls. Still,

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she had admitted that there were compensations for this error of Alethea's in the choice of her sex; as if she had been a boy, she would have been sent to school as soon as her governess had grown fond of her. But here was a boy about whom there was no such disadvantage. Miss Nash need not fear that Hans would be taken from her when he was nine.

She was now settled in a cottage on the Cornish coast, where she bred goats and chickens, pigeons, cats, and dogs, having developed a genius for persuading the lion and the lamb to lie down amicably together. Countess Friedenbach had not heard of her since she was with Alethea, and when she was told of this houseful of pets, she was the more delighted.

'It is the ideal place for Hans,' she said. 'His power with animals is almost uncanny. You remember the doe and her fawn? Things like that are always happening. Any bird will perch beside him, and even the squirrels don't scuttle away.'

Parting with Hans was made much easier for Alethea now she had this plan in her mind. She was even anxious to be off, so as to lose no time in seeing Miss Nash, and beginning to arrange for the little boy's journey back.

Nicholas made no reply when Alethea told him that she was going to bring Hans back to England. His attitude was that the child belonged to Ale-

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thea, and she must do with him as she thought best. His only stipulation was that the little boy was not to live at Brokeyates, and he did not even ask where the money came from which would pay for his living elsewhere.

Colonel Bracton had left Alethea all that he had. This was not much, as the greater part of his income had been a pension, but Alethea possessed enough to pay all that was required for Hans. As for Nicholas, he had never concerned himself over his wife's money, but had left it all in her hands. In the old days, it had been too small a sum to think of in comparison with his own riches, and now he had probably forgotten that she had any money at all.

A telegram to Miss Nash a few days later, announced a visit from Alethea.

Cairn Gorm was a very amusing little cottage in a delightful situation about half a mile from the sea. Round it were concentrated all the features which are recalled to the mind by the sound of the word *Cornwall*. Rocks and ferns, fuschias and camellias, sunshine and a glittering sea, a ruined chapel, and in the distance, a disused mine shaft—all of these came into view from the windows of Miss Nash's irregular little house, which was built so crookedly on the side of the cliff that it was a wonder how it was kept in position. Miss Nash's garden had no end, for she allowed her plants to

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stray wherever they would, upon the rough ground about her; and she planted rose bushes wherever there was the smallest foothold for their roots. Her azalias burnt brilliantly quite a quarter of a mile from her door, and her bulbs sprang up as far away as she could carry her trowel. There was no season of the year when she had not flowers in sight. Miss Nash hid her chickens behind the walls of the ruined chapel, as she did not think their manners either decorative or decent; but their cluckings could be heard at all hours of the day, proving that they were busy laying eggs. The pigeons crooned about their dovecote, or flew in and out of the cottage door, which was always open; and a line of straw-thatched beehives stood along the garden path.

Miss Nash must have had many more hours in her day than are marked upon the clocks of the rest of the world, for, in spite of the care of her many animals, she had time for a succession of hobbies. Her house overflowed with them. At one time, she had collected shells and pebbles of exquisite colours, and now upon the many little tables which crowded her rooms, she had placed shallow glass dishes filled with shells or stones lying transfigured under clear sea water. Then, all through her life, Miss Nash had made a practice of picking up on her walks, curiously shaped pieces of wood, fragments from the boughs of trees, or

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crooked sections of their roots; for in them she detected what looked to her like the shapes of prehistoric animals, goblins, or mythical creatures. When she got home, she would break off a piece here and there from her finds, and give a little twist to what remained, and so she would set free the strange being whose existence she had divined. These oddly contorted wooden imps stood about the house in various attitudes, leaning against walls, propped against the legs of cabinets, or perched upon mantelpieces. They filled the rooms with a droll life.

And now Miss Nash had painted water colour portraits of these wooden pets of hers—drawings full of character and individuality; but there was no space for them on the already crowded walls of the rooms. They stood in their frames, stacked upon the floors. Portfolios held Miss Nash's collection of skeleton leaves, and her pressed flowers; while three or four flower pieces carried out in feathers and hung on the wall, showed that she possessed delicacy of craftsmanship as well as a rare sensitiveness to beauty.

Alethea had forgotten how much space in the house was taken by all these treasures; but now, as she sat talking with Miss Nash and eating a home-made scone filled with Cornish cream, she wondered if there was room among the collections for even so small a person as Hans. And yet, how he

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would love them! And how he and Miss Nash would love each other! She was the perfect companion for a child, for she had never left behind her own childish wonder at the beauty and the strangeness of the world.

There was something very gladdening to Alethea in the delight with which Miss Nash received her proposal. She welcomed it with shining eyes. Alethea told her that the child was very small for his age, and that she hoped that his growth would be helped by the sea air, and the simple outdoor life; but as she talked, she was wondering whether she had not been too hasty. She looked round at the thousands of objects which crowded every table in the house, and she wondered whether the dust which must surely collect beneath them might not counteract the effect of the fresh air which blew so freely outside the cottage.

But even as she talked, there came into her mind a solution of this difficulty; and she found herself proposing to Miss Nash that she should build on to the cottage two large new rooms for Hans. He should have his playroom on the ground floor, its windows opening to the ground so that he could run in and out; while above this room would be his bedroom, free from the accumulations of Miss Nash's freaks of fancy. Alethea could do this by selling out a few hundred pounds of her capital, and thus she would make an ideal home for Hans

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in Miss Nash's house, but away from too immediate a contact with her treasures.

The scheme was practically settled before Alethea left that evening, and her one regret was that it meant a certain delay before Hans could arrive. But it was worth waiting for.

Miss Nash was delighted at the thought of the addition to her house, and she at once recognized that the walls of Hans' playroom would be the ideal place on which she could hang the portraits of her wooden people. Alethea agreed that they would be pictures after Hans' own heart.

Back at Brokeyates, Alethea found it hard to resist talking to Nicholas about her plans, but she saw that he was already inclined to be suspicious and jealous over the time she had lately given to Hans. She therefore shut her secret into the back of her mind, to be played with when she was alone. Outwardly, she was entirely occupied by her life at Brokeyates, but during the next two months, her heart was living in those two spacious empty rooms, the walls of which were rising in that cottage on the coast of Cornwall as a home for her child. She planned every detail, and saw each piece of furniture in its place. It became for her a fairy palace to which she flew on a magic carpet, when life at Brokeyates became more than usually difficult.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MONTH was February, and Hans was nearly three years old, when he came to live at Cairn Gorm. Miss Nash had called her house after a favourite brooch which she had inherited from her grandmother, and the name was oddly appropriate. No other could so completely have expressed the character of that amazing collection of treasures. The new rooms were spacious and airy, and Alethea felt very happy about her little boy when she left him and his merry Bavarian nurse, playing together in the sun-filled nursery.

She now made a rule of going to Cornwall for a few days every month. The rest of her time was given to Nicholas and Portia, and to Brokeyates. She gardened with Nicholas, did lessons with Portia; she made jam; she bottled gooseberries. It was an even uneventful life.

As long as they saw no one from outside, Nicholas was easy to live with; but visitors generally aroused in him that suspicious antagonism which meant that he thought they despised him. When people had been to the house, he was often morose and depressed for hours afterwards. People

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sometimes questioned Alethea about her little boy and she told them that his delicacy obliged them to send him to the sea till he was older; but if these questions were asked when Nicholas was in the room, then Alethea knew that she had a difficult evening before her. Not that her husband ever spoke of what had been said; but he sat gloomily, absorbed in the train of thought which it was her life's work to banish from his mind.

Life at Brokeyates was lived in a grave atmosphere. It was a place for hard work. It called for courage, and a high sense of duty. Nicholas was always busy on the estate, and Alethea was equally so with things in the house. There would have been little time for gaiety and laughter even if Nicholas had been a man who took things less seriously than he did. Alethea sometimes longed for a world where life was not so unfailingly lived upon the high level of those grand words of Longfellow's: 'Life is real. Life is earnest.'

Such a world she found at Cairn Gorm. Every one of Miss Nash's multifarious hobbies had been begun solely as an enterprise of pleasure. It was true that she carried them out with great thoroughness, working at them with whole-hearted zest and devotion; but she was one of those happy people who have never learnt that there can be a difference between working and playing. She was as light-hearted over her work as if it was nothing

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but a game: and she played with the earnestness which most people reserve for a solemn piece of work.

Hans trotted about with her, watching all she did, and sharing all her occupations. He fed the chickens, took the goats for walks, and poured water over the shells and the pebbles. He gathered pieces of wood to make his own collection of curious beasts, and he planted flowers and potatoes in his own corner of the garden. He was immensely busy, and wonderfully well. But he did not grow. He was a perfect child in miniature.

Cairn Gorm was a very laughing house. Peels of laughter were heard in it from morning to night. Miss Nash laughed, Hans laughed, Greta, the Bavarian nurse, laughed, and the Cornish maid-of-all-work laughed louder than any of them. And all this laughter was accompanied by the songs of birds, the cooing of pigeons, the hum of bees, and the various noises made by all the animals. It was a house full of merry clatter.

When Alethea came back to Brokeyates after her visits to Cairn Gorm, she was every time struck by the grave silence of the house. Even Portia was portentously solemn. She looked with pompous scorn at her mother, when, as sometimes happened, she came back from Cornwall with some wisps of the irresponsible laughter of Cairn

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Gorm tossing about her. Such follies had quickly to be tidied away.

So life ran on in its groove, and while it remained there, it was equable and placidly happy. Nicholas had fewer bouts of melancholy, and Alethea began to think that Tante Helena was going to be right in her prediction that he would grow out of them. Yet, she knew that she was acquiescing in a maimed life for them all. If Nicholas would only have had the courage to break free from what he called the 'trap' which held him, he would have found that the morbid fear which poisoned his life, might have become instead its joy. Alethea dared not urge him to make the effort; it would have meant raising the forbidden question of Hans. Instead, she divided her own life into two parts, and in spite of her love for Nicholas and of his for her, it was inevitable that the Brokeyates part was the sombre one. And all the time, Nicholas had no idea that he was missing anything. Alethea made him as completely happy as he knew how to be.

So it would have continued indefinitely, if the war had not come to break the grooves which held so many lives, and theirs among the rest. Nicholas, who for so long had shunned his fellow men, was now sufficiently stirred to join the army without hesitation. Something had entered his life which was bigger than his pre-occupation with dwarfs.

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Alethea at once decided that she could not remain at Brokeyates alone with Portia. She shut up the house, and enrolled herself as a V.A.D., finding work in a country house in Cornwall, which had been converted into a hospital. Cairn Gorm was less than two miles away, and Portia was sent to a school which had migrated from the east coast, to find a temporary shelter in Penzance, so she too was within reach.

Hans was now ten years old, and Alethea found him a most enchanting companion. She saw him every day, spending all her spare time with him. He loved to hear her read aloud, and he would sit beside her for hours, drawing pictures to illustrate the stories she read. He drew in a spirit of sheer delight. He had never learnt to take himself seriously, and he was immensely amused when his drawings looked quite unlike what he was trying to do. He always knew when a thing was wrong, though he did not know how to put it right. But Alethea saw great promise in his pictures, which always seemed to give her a more living impression of the scene he tried to draw than she had reached herself by reading the story. He also delighted in poetry, and his mother was astonished by the ease with which he sometimes could recite a whole poem which he had only heard once or twice.

Mrs. Wynne, the owner of the house in which Alethea was nursing, took a great fancy to Hans,

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and she allowed him to be at the hospital as much as he liked. He made friends with many of the patients, chattering with them as they lay in the garden, and often sitting down beside one or the other to make a portrait. These were great jokes, and, in spite of the laughter with which they were received by their sitters, Alethea thought that her son was very clever in getting a likeness. Hans laughed as much as anyone at his attempts, but Alethea was sure that he would some day really be an artist.

Portia often came to Cairn Gorm for a weekend, and so she, for the first time, came to know her brother. She despised him from the first. She was extremely vain of her own appearance, and especially of the fact that she was very tall for her age. She frequently boasted that she was one of the tallest girls in the school although she was only twelve.

When she saw Hans, she looked at him with the utmost scorn.

'How old are you?' she asked.

Hans said that he was nearly eleven.

'Nearly eleven? Why, you are a disgrace to the family. I've seen a child of three who was as tall as you.'

Hans declared that he was not a disgrace, but he quite thought that his sister was being amusing. Nothing was ever farther from her intention, and

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she was annoyed with Hans for thinking it possible that she could fall so low as to try to make a joke. She told him that he was a baby, and she bullied him as much as she could.

It was not easy to bully Hans, for he never suspected that anyone could wish to be unkind. He treated Portia's teasing as a new kind of game, and he played it with zest. When she snatched one of his drawings, tore it up, and threw it into the fire, he entered into the spirit of the joke, and tore up several more, clapping his hands with delight over the flames which flared from the paper. When she hid his horse and cart, he sat on her doll, and it was only because he didn't weigh much more than the doll itself, that no disaster occurred. She loved putting things out of his reach, and this of course she could easily do. It gave her the chance of mocking at him for being so small. But this was to Hans the best game of all, for he had made an art of reaching things which by nature were out of his reach. He could always find something to climb upon, and there was nothing he enjoyed more than carrying off something which had been put by Portia on the highest shelf in the room. He interpreted all his sister's bullying as her way of putting him on his mettle, and giving him the chance to show her what he could do.

Portia was exasperated by his denseness. These

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pranks of hers were always played after Alethea had gone back to the hospital, and when Miss Nash was busy with her chickens, or with some other of her many avocations. They would both have known that Portia was acting from spite, as Hans never knew. But there was one person who was quite awake to the little girl's intentions, and this was Greta, the Bavarian nurse. She hated Portia accordingly, and made no secret of her feelings.

The war was still in its early stages. 'Enemy aliens' were not yet the objects of suspicion which they came to be later on. Greta had only been instructed to register her name with the police, and to report periodically at the Police Station; and in this far-away little village, where everyone knew each other as if they were one family, such reporting was merely a formality. Greta and the policeman were the best of friends, and no one in the village could possibly look upon her as an enemy. She cried a good deal when she first heard that her countrymen were going to war with the English; but the idea of war in itself was utterly incomprehensible to anyone who lived in the atmosphere of Cairn Gorm.

Portia, however, was a good deal more sophisticated than these village people. She heard a great deal at school about German spies, and as the antagonism slowly grew more acute between her

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and the German girl, she began to think that anyone whom she disliked so much must certainly be a spy. The idea attracted her, as she turned it over in her rather heavy but very logical mind, and she saw in it the opportunity for a very exciting and patriotic action on her part. She longed to tell the girls at school that she had caught a German spy. She was certain that her name would be in the newspapers, and she might even get a letter from the King to thank her for what she had done. She was so much carried away by the prospect of this notoriety, that she quite forgot that her only reason for suspecting Greta was the fact that the Bavarian had smacked her for teasing Hans.

Portia's campaign began badly. She went solemnly to her mother, and warned her of the great risk they all ran by having a German spy in the house. To her annoyance, Alethea simply laughed at the idea.

'Greta adores us all,' she said. 'I think she has almost forgotten that she isn't as English as we are. But even if she wanted to be a spy, it would be no use. She can't find out any more secrets than we can.'

'I think you ought to be patriotic enough to hate an enemy of your country,' Portia said pompously.

'My dear child, it is only the Germans who sing

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Hymns of Hate. We English people don't feel at all like that.'

'I do,' Portia answered, in righteous tones. 'And I wonder that *you* don't hate the people who are trying to kill daddy.'

'Greta isn't trying to kill daddy.'

'She would if she could. And I shouldn't be at all surprised if she tried to blow up the hospital with a bomb. She could easily do that.'

'My dear, don't frighten yourself with such dreadful thoughts. We are all quite safe here.'

'I am not frightened at all,' said Portia, offended. 'It's nothing of *that* sort. But I do think we ought all to try to help our country.'

'We are all trying to do that, and daddy most of all. But that doesn't mean that we must hate Greta. I feel very sorry for her. It must be very sad for her to know that her countrymen have brought this dreadful war upon the world, when she lives among us all, and sees that we were only wanting to be friends.'

'I don't a bit want to be friends,' said Portia stoutly. 'Not with Greta at any rate. And I never will be.'

'Darling, you mustn't let yourself feel like that. Think how good Greta is to Hans.'

'Perhaps you think so,' Portia said ominously, 'but I expect she is putting chopped glass into his food. I know the Germans often do that.' She

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hoped to touch Alethea upon a tender spot. 'I've heard a lot about it from the girls at school.'

'Don't listen to those little idiots when they talk such arrant nonsense,' said Alethea. 'We are safe from chopped glass in Cornwall, I can promise you.'

She told Portia's head mistress about this conversation, and she asked her to try to prevent the other girls from putting such ideas into Portia's head.

'The war is horrible enough in reality,' she said, 'without children's minds being poisoned by such fantastic imaginations as chopped glass in their food, or German spies in their houses. My poor little girl is torturing herself with the idea that her little brother's Bavarian nurse is trying to kill him.'

Miss Gough was annoyed. She denied that Portia had heard these things at school. But she remarked that it was a pity, in time of war, to keep in one's house a servant from an enemy country. It was quite possible that such a woman might be used by her own country in some way, and in any case, one should avoid even the suspicion of such a thing. She suggested that Portia had heard the village people talking about Greta when she was at Cairn Gorm for the week-end.

Alethea went away feeling ruffled. She thought that Miss Gough had been impertinent, but she

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heard no more from Portia about Greta. She was, however, to hear more of the subject later on.

CHAPTER XIX

WHEN Alethea was on night duty, she always spent her days at Cairn Gorm, and had supper with Miss Nash before going back to the hospital. Then Greta, who adored her, escorted her back to duty, and they went by a short cut over the cliff. On dark nights, Greta carried a curious old iron lantern which was one of her cherished possessions. She had brought it with her from home, and it had never before been of any use. The light it gave was practically negligible, as Greta had never had a wick which fitted it, but she burnt in it pieces of rag, which she twisted into some sort of shape, and then soaked in oil. They very soon burnt out, but they always lasted long enough for Alethea to pick her way among the rocks; and Greta had the eyes of a cat, and was as sure-footed as a goat, so that she was quite able to come home in the dark.

This lantern it was, which caused the trouble. Portia found it one day in the nursery cupboard; and, busy-body as she was, she took it out to look at it, and to discover, as she speedily did, that it was not so clean as it ought to have been.

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'What is this?' she asked Greta. 'It is disgracefully dirty. You must clean it.'

'Put it back,' said Greta sharply. 'It is not yours. Leave it alone.'

'A dirty thing like this should be kept in the outhouse,' Portia went on, bent upon making herself unpleasant. 'I shall put it there myself.'

'It is mine. Do not touch it. Give it to me at once,' said Greta, now roused to rage.

'I don't believe it's yours at all. Of course it belongs to Miss Nash.'

'It is my own. It is a German light. Miss Nash knows nothing about it. Give it to me.'

'A German light!' cried Portia, dropping the lantern with a clatter to the ground. 'How horrible! I won't touch it. No wonder Miss Nash knows nothing about it. It oughtn't to be here.'

'It has as much right to be here as I have,' muttered Greta, picking up her treasure, and holding it behind her back.

'And that's no right at all,' said Portia. 'You ought to be in Germany with the Huns,' and she ran into the garden.

'I shall take her horrible old lantern away and hide it from her,' she was thinking. 'That will put her into a rage.' And as soon as she heard Greta washing Hans' tunic in the back kitchen, she crept into the nursery, and carried off the lantern. She

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hid it in a big basket, in which she had brought her clean shoes and some books.

In that basket it went back to the school, where its odd shape attracted the girls' attention.

'What *is* this?' they asked, crowding round Portia.

'It is a German lantern,' she answered, rather proudly.

'A German lantern? Where *did* you get it? Was it captured from a spy who has been signalling?'

Now this very obvious idea had not occurred to Portia. It was curious that it should not have struck her, for suspected signalling by spies was one of the topics of the day. She felt annoyed with herself for having allowed this brilliant guess to originate from one of the other girls.

'Hush!' she said in tones of great mystery. 'Don't speak about it. I mean to catch the spy, but if it is talked about, she will get away.'

The other girls were immensely impressed.

'Do you know who it is?' they asked.

Portia nodded.

'How *did* you get hold of the lantern?'

'By a trick,' said Portia, and this sounded as if she had been very clever. Really there had been no trick, beyond the simple opening of the door of the nursery cupboard.

'What shall you do with it?'

'Give it to the policeman.'

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The girls gasped at the audacity of this. The policeman! Not even Miss Gough.

Portia's plan of action came to her with these questions. Till now, she had not realized what a weapon had fallen into her hands when she carried away Greta's lantern. She had not meant to keep it, but only to hide it somewhere at Cairn Gorm, and so to give Greta the trouble of looking for it. Now it dawned upon her that she was on the brink of the discovery of a huge conspiracy.

'Don't ask any more about it,' she said, looking mysterious. 'These things have to be very secret.'

She did not know what to do next, and so she took the lantern to Miss Stolwell, the youngest of the teachers, and a favourite with the children because, being very little older than some of themselves, they saw that she liked playtime better than lessons. The school imagined that the elder mistresses would like nothing better than to be giving lessons all day.

Miss Stolwell was a most satisfactory confidante. She saw that the lantern was of no ordinary pattern, and at once decided that it must be used for some nefarious purpose. Portia explained that she had already suspected Greta of being a spy.

'But mummy is completely taken in by her,' she said. 'She won't help us at all.'

'We must act for ourselves,' said Miss Stolwell, feeling, as Portia did, immensely important. 'I

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see the lantern has been used quite recently. Can you find out if anyone knows when she uses it?"

'I can easily ask the next time I go there. In fact she will be sure to ask me for it herself. She will be in a fury because it's lost.'

'No. She won't ask for it,' said Miss Stolwell in impressive tones. '*She won't dare to.* But she knows you found it, and she will guess that you are on her tracks. You have made an enemy of her. I think it is probably dangerous for you to go there at all.'

Portia looked very superior on hearing this. She was not frightened. No one could be so who knew Greta. But she could see that Miss Stolwell thought her very heroic, and she liked this.

'I wonder what she will do to-night when she finds it has gone,' she said.

'Probably run away,' said Miss Stolwell. 'She will be terrified, knowing that her secret is discovered. We ought to act at once.'

'I shan't be going there again till next Saturday,' said Portia, 'unless . . .'

She saw ahead of her the possibility of an extra holiday.

'We can't possibly wait a whole week,' said Miss Stolwell, with decision. 'Who knows what may happen before then? Perhaps Miss Gough will let you go to-morrow. It is Sunday and the girls sometimes are allowed out.'

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'How can we persuade her?'

'I will speak to her.'

She had a very convincing story to put before Miss Gough, and she found the ground already prepared. The Head Mistress had been nettled by Alethea's words to her, and she was prepared to believe that Cairn Gorm was a nest of spies. Miss Stolwell had no difficulty in making her quite certain that Lady Roxerby's German maid was signalling to submarines at sea, and that she had been circumvented by clever little Portia who had carried off her lantern. Miss Gough agreed that, before informing the police, it would be as well to find out if possible at what times the lantern was used. They must act swiftly, and in such a manner as to prevent the German girl from guessing that she was suspected. Miss Stolwell said she wanted to visit the hospital on the following afternoon, as she knew one of the patients, and she would take Portia with her, ostensibly for a treat.

'She will find out all we want,' she added. 'She is very cute.'

So it was arranged, and the following afternoon Miss Stolwell and Portia set out on bicycles upon their great mission. It was Sunday afternoon. Peace lay upon the moors. The silence was deepened by an occasional church bell. The companions rode along in gay spirits.

Miss Stolwell left Portia at Cairn Gorm, while

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she herself rode on to the hospital. She was glad of the opportunity of going to see this young man, whom she had known slightly at home, and whose wounds now made it impossible for him to escape her attentions.

Portia's ideal character was Sherlock Holmes, and she was ready with all sorts of cunning devices by which she meant to entrap Greta into inadvertently betraying that she had lost her lantern. It was therefore disappointing to be greeted by Hans and his nurse who both ran out to meet her, asking where she had hidden it.

'You had it last,' they said. 'What did you do with it?'

'I don't know where it is,' Portia answered, feeling that the tables were being turned upon her, and it was she who was accused of spying.

'You took it from the cupboard. You have hidden it to tease me. Give it to me, or I will tell your mama,' said Greta.

'I don't know anything about it. If I did have it, I probably threw it away. It's no good. Nobody can possibly want it.'

'You cannot have thrown it away and forget where. You have hidden it on purpose. Tell me where it is.'

'I really don't know,' said Portia, affecting indifference. 'What does it matter? An old thing like that, which is never used?'

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'Greta uses it,' Hans now interposed, 'and she wants to use it again. Give it to her. She does not like teasing games.'

'I'm awfully sorry if I've lost it,' said Portia with what she felt was consummate cunning. 'I expect it will turn up some time, and I don't expect you really use it, do you?'

'I use it every night,' said Greta.

'Every night? What for?'

'When I go along the cliff with your mamma.'

'Do you really take it onto the cliff every night?'

'Of course I do.'

Portia thrilled at the admission.

'Then of course I will try to find it,' she said. 'I believe I threw it among those bushes by the chapel.'

She went out and pretended to search, while Hans came too, longing to help.

'Did you really throw it away out here?' he asked, enjoying the search, as he always enjoyed everything.

'I expect I did. But it is rather silly of Greta to make such a fuss. I don't believe a bit that she uses the old thing every night.'

'O yes she does. I have often woken up in the middle of the night, and seen her come back with it in her hand.'

'*In the middle of the night?* Does Greta go out in the middle of the night?'

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'O yes, nearly always. She loves walking in the dark,' said Hans, for whom the middle of the night meant any time when he woke up after he had been sent to bed.

'I wonder what she goes out for.'

'Heaps of things. To take care of mummy, and to see witches and goblins.'

'Witches and goblins! What nonsense!' said Portia. This sensible child was well aware that witches and goblins do not exist. But so ridiculous an excuse for walking in the dark only made Greta's conduct the more suspicious.

She redoubled her pretended efforts to find the lantern, hoping to come upon something hidden in the bushes which might be additional evidence against Greta. She had by now forgotten that the whole case against the Bavarian had been invented by herself, and she entirely believed in it.

So on that Sunday night, Miss Gough and Miss Stolwell found that they had a very complete case to put before the police. It was established that the German woman was in the habit of walking alone on the cliffs at night, carrying a very suspicious-looking lantern. There had long been rumours of signalling from the coast, and now there could be little doubt that the culprit was discovered.

The information was sent to the authorities, and Portia waited with intense excitement. She ex-

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pected that the case would be heard in the Tower of London, where she would be called upon to give evidence, and she would probably afterwards be personally thanked by the King for her discovery of this vile plot.

But no word came from the police. They received the information, and then a pall of silence fell over the whole affair. Portia found her lessons unbearably boring. By every post, she was expecting a summons to London, and in the meantime, French verbs were a dismal anti-climax. Her teachers had never before found her troublesome. She had always been a pattern pupil, for though she had no originality of mind, her modest ambition had always been to know just a little more than the other girls, of the things that the other girls knew. So she worked steadily and she enjoyed organized games.

Now, even Miss Stolwell had one day to punish her for her inattention.

CHAPTER XX

BUT THE blow had fallen. One day, Alethea received an urgent message at the hospital, asking her to go to Cairn Gorm without delay. The messenger was a village girl who could say nothing as to what had happened, and Alethea hastened across the cliff in torment. She was sure that Hans had had some terrible accident. He must have been killed, and neither Miss Nash nor Greta could leave him, nor could they face her to break the news. During that agonized quarter of an hour, Alethea realized that everything in her life—every interest, every occupation, every affection had fallen away from her. They simply didn't exist, and never had existed. Only Hans had ever mattered. She had thought that her life was so full—that the war counted, in fact that it was the one thing which counted to her at the time: that the hospital counted, with those scores of suffering men who needed her so much: that Nicholas counted, for was he not the love of her life? But now she knew that, twisted into every nerve and vein and muscle of her body, in the background of every thought which came into her mind, the

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chief part of her every hope and fear, the remote source of every smile which came into her eyes, and the secret spring of her bitterest tears—was this tiny lovely child of hers, so small in his frame, so limitless in the beauty of his nature.

And now, she was convinced that he was dead. The world was unutterably empty.

But when she reached Cairn Gorm, it was Hans himself who met her at the door, and leapt into her arms, sobbing wildly. The joy was so overwhelming that for the moment she forgot that she had never seen him cry since she first took him with her to Friedenbach. His nature was so clear and sunny, his gaiety so spontaneous, that from his babyhood he had gurgled with joy like a little stream running over smoothly rounded pebbles. And this had been Alethea's pride. She had even set before herself the rare ambition of surrounding and protecting this child of hers so securely with her love, that all through his life he should never know the meaning of tears. It would be a miracle if the boy, born seemingly under a curse, and the source at his birth of so much unhappiness, could yet be given a life which danced like a star throughout a dark night.

These hopes were killed in that moment on the threshold of Cairn Gorm, but Alethea was unaware that they were dead. She only knew that Hans was alive. Whatever was the cause of this

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mysterious trouble, she could hold him in her arms and try to comfort him. Their relations seemed even more beautiful than ever, for never before had he needed her like this.

She could not understand what he was saying, in the unfamiliar, shrill, broken voice in which he was pouring forth a confused stream of unintelligible words.

'What is it, my precious, my darling?' she said. 'Don't cry. Mummy will make it right.'

She was confident that nothing was too hard for her to do, now that he was alive.

And then she heard someone else sobbing inside the house. Through the open door came the sound of hysterical weeping, and she recognized Greta's voice.

'*Nein, nein,*' she was saying. '*I' mag net fort. I lass' mi' net wegschaffen. Was hab' i' denn 'tan?*'

Then followed more sobs.

Miss Nash appeared at the door, and she too was in tears.

'I am thankful that you have come,' she said. 'The police are here. It is about that lost lantern. It seems that it was they who carried it off. Now they suspect Greta of making signals with it, and they want to take her to prison.'

Alethea felt Hans' little body quiver against her as he clung round her neck.

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'No, no, not prison,' he said. 'Greta must stay with me.'

'Of course she will,' said Alethea. 'Don't cry my darling. Mummy is here. I will not let them take Greta away.'

But the situation seemed beyond her control.

She gave Hans to Miss Nash.

'Miss Nash will give you some water to drink,' she said, 'and then you won't cry any more. I am going to help Greta.'

She felt convinced that her help could be of little avail, but she followed the direction of Greta's screams, and she went to the kitchen.

She found to her dismay that she had not to deal with the village policeman, a friendly old fellow, who knew Greta too well to suspect her of treachery. Instead, she saw two strange men, one of whom held in his hand the incriminating lantern. Greta sat weeping upon a chair.

'What is the matter?' asked Alethea, bringing into the room an air of impartial benevolence.

Greta relapsed into her native tongue, which made her more than ever *suspecte*. The Bavarian patois which she spoke was not a form of German with which the police linguist was acquainted, and to him it sounded like the jargon of an underworld of criminals and spies.

Alethea turned to the men, and asked them to tell her the charge they had to make against

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Greta. They were extremely courteous, but their instructions were quite definite. Nothing that could be said could make any difference. It was true that they had received a report which connected Greta with some suspected signalling from the cliff, and her possession of the lantern lent some colour to the suspicion. But the internment of aliens living in the country was matter which the Government kept entirely in its own hands, and dealt with at its discretion. Without making any definite charge, it was now considered in the public interest that Greta should join her compatriots in an internment camp for the period of the war. The police declared that this was no hardship. The conditions in the camp were good, and the girl would be among people of her own nationality.

‘But what about my little boy?’ Alethea pleaded. ‘He has been an invalid all his life, and he entirely depends on the care of this nurse, who has been with him since he was a baby. I am willing to make myself personally responsible for her. I will carry out any conditions which may be imposed, if only you will allow her to remain. The child’s health is at stake.’

‘I’m very sorry my lady. I myself would gladly do as you wish, but I have no choice in the matter. The only thing for you to do is to write to headquarters. You may be able to prevail on them to

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make an exception. But we can only carry out our orders.'

'Won't you give us a day or two to make other arrangements?'

'I wish I could oblige your ladyship, but we have no discretion in the matter. We can only do as we are told.'

There was nothing to do but to assure Greta that everything should be done to make her internment a merely temporary one.

'I am afraid you must make up your mind to go to-day, but you know we shall leave no stone unturned to get you back with us as soon as possible.'

Greta begged to be allowed to see Hans once more.

'Better not,' said the policeman. 'The girl will only make a scene.'

But Alethea had not got the heart to refuse. She implored Greta to make Hans think that she was only going to spend a short time with some German friends, and would be back with him in a very short time.

'Please don't make him more unhappy and frightened than he is already,' she said.

But Greta had lost all her self-control. She ran to the nursery, where Miss Nash had succeeded in distracting Hans sufficiently for him to have begun to play quietly with some of his toys.

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Greta flew into the room like a whirlwind.

'They take me from you, my lovely one,' she sobbed. 'They will put me in their prison. They tell me I speak to the ships with my poor old light. It is false, and they know it. The wicked Portia. She has done this. And now we shall never meet again. I must die in the prison, and who will care for my darling when I am gone. No, no, I will not leave him. They must tear me from him, for I will not go of my own will.'

Alethea was aghast, and she saw that she had been bitterly mistaken in not listening to the policeman's advice: but she had not felt it possible to be so cruel to Greta. Now Hans clung to his nurse as fervently as she clung to him. His howls mingled with her sobs, and indeed in a few moments, they became shrieks. He was wild with despair and terror.

Alethea was obliged to tear him forcibly away from Greta, and when he found himself in her arms, and saw his nurse being dragged off, he turned on his mother like a fierce little wild animal, and he fought with all his might, battling with his fists and nails, till blood ran down her face.

She could hardly believe that this struggling, demented, frantic child could be her gay and radiant Hans. For the second time that day she felt that she had lost him, not now indeed by death, but by some new and hideous mischance. Hans

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was lost, and in his place she held in her arms a changeling, full of hatred and enmity against herself. He would not let her kiss him. He covered his ears and refused to listen to her soothing. He lay stiff in her arms, so that she could not caress him, or hold him to her. And all the time, he screamed passionately for Greta.

It went to Alethea's heart to discover that Miss Nash could soothe him when she could not. As long as his mother held him in her arms, he kicked and struggled, shouting that she had promised that she would not let them take Greta away. He evidently felt that she had failed him. But when he was handed to Miss Nash, his violence subsided and he lay quietly, moaning and sobbing in a most heart-breaking way. He appeared to be quite worn out by his misery. Alethea felt that she had for ever lost his love.

But she had no intention of giving him up without a struggle. Though she saw that she must at the moment leave him to Miss Nash, she wrote to the hospital to say that she could not return that night. Her child was ill, and his nurse had left him. In her own mind she resolved that she would never leave Hans again. She must, in some way, find out how to win him back to herself.

And all that afternoon and evening, she was obliged to deny herself the sad bliss of tending him. She sat out of sight, and watched him lie

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in the arms of Miss Nash. He was limp and subdued, and now and then he whimpered a little. He looked even smaller than usual as he lay there, and Alethea realized afresh his unlikeness to other children.

He had always been so full of life, so gay, and so merry, that often for weeks at a time she had forgotten that in the eyes of a stranger he must never be anything but a rather pathetic little dwarf. Now she herself had become this stranger, and she saw him with new sad eyes. He seemed a poor little puppet, lying on Miss Nash's lap, limp and hardly human, his tiny limbs hanging loosely, and his little frame shaken from time to time by a little gasping sob. With clenched hands, she fought against the bitter jealousy which arose within her when she saw the child in the arms of Miss Nash rather than in her own. She compelled herself to be thankful that the other woman could help him now that she herself was helpless.

"Thank God, she can quiet him! Thank God, she can quiet him!" Her lips moved with the phrase, while her unhappy heart rebelled.

Evening came. They did not try to give him the bath which had always meant such games with Greta, but as he became gradually more sleepy, Miss Nash slipped off his clothes and put him into his nightshirt. And when he was in bed, Alethea watched beside him all night.

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Hans was ill for several weeks, and at first his mother could do nothing for him. The sight of her seemed to rekindle all the emotions of that terrible day, and always started again those cries and sobs which sent his temperature up so alarmingly. This hurt Alethea even more than the illness itself. Nothing is harder to bear than to find that one's presence is harmful to the person whom one loves best in the world, and to be shut out of his sick-room; but Alethea accepted the situation, and played what part was left for her. Fortunately, Hans was for the greater part of his time in a semi-dozing condition, and then Alethea guarded him, while Miss Nash rested. As far as possible, Alethea kept out of sight, and though the child was never left alone, he was only aware of Miss Nash as his nurse.

Meanwhile, Portia heard nothing of Greta. Alethea wrote to tell Miss Gough of Hans' illness, as it meant that Portia must spend her holidays at school till he was well; but no hint as to the cause of the illness reached the school. It was therefore more than a month before Portia went again to Cairn Gorm, and by this time Hans was convalescent, and he appeared to have forgotten the terrors which had haunted him during the weeks of his illness.

Although Portia was constitutionally insensitive, she was shocked by the appearance of her mother.

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Alethea seemed to her to have completely changed. She had grown much thinner, and the oval curves of her face had fallen in upon the bones. Her chin had become a separate, prominent feature, standing out like a wedge. The deep serene eyes had surely grown actually darker in colour, and there were black rings round them. She might have been twenty years older, for her face was lined like that of a woman of fifty. Alethea had always had a radiant smile, but now it was a shadowed thing, gentle, but altogether emptied of its gaiety.

They went to the beach together, to find shells. All the girls at school had collections, but thanks to Miss Nash and Hans, Portia's was the best of all. The weather had been rough, so some rare specimens had been washed in. At first Alethea did not speak of Hans, thinking it unfair to fill the holiday with talk of illness.

Portia was awed by her mother's aspect, and Alethea read an unexpected sympathy in her quietness. It seemed that Portia was fonder than she had thought of her little brother; so, when they got home, she suggested that they should carry their shells in to show them to Hans.

'Don't say anything about Greta,' she said, before they went into the room.

'Why not?'

'I expect you haven't heard; but the cause of his being ill was that Greta had to go away. The

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Government decided that, being a German, she must not stay here, but must go into a camp with other foreigners. Hans was dreadfully frightened and unhappy, and it started this illness.'

'Did they think that Greta was a spy?'

Alethea felt a momentary irritation. She remembered how tiresome Portia had been before about Greta.

'Of course not,' she answered. 'It is simply the law of the land, and we must obey it. But it caused this terrible illness of poor darling little Hans, and it has made us all very unhappy. Poor Greta, she loved us so much, and now she is alone among strangers, although many of them are her own countrymen. Such things happen in a war.'

Alethea's voice was shaking, and Portia felt guilty for a moment. Had she really done this? Then she told herself that, of course, it could be nothing to do with her, for had not mummy said that Greta was not imprisoned as a spy. It was the ordinary law of the land, and nothing to do with that lantern.

Having convinced herself of this, she felt free from all responsibility for her mother's changed face, and for the illness of Hans. But when she got back to school, she could not resist taking to herself the credit for Greta's internment. She whispered to Miss Stolwell that the Government had sent Greta to prison as a spy.

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'So we have done a splendid thing for our country,' she said boastfully. And she really didn't know whether she honestly believed, or wanted to believe, that Greta's internment was, as her mother had said, nothing but the ordinary law of the land.

CHAPTER XXI

GRETA's release was refused; but as the fever passed and Hans became convalescent, he seemed to grow accustomed to being without her. His love for his mother came back, and he transferred to her all the dependence with which he had formerly clung to his nurse. He couldn't bear anyone else to do things for him. He wanted Alethea, with all the new nervousness which his illness had left behind; and when he at last began to show some flashes of his old gaiety, it was to her that he looked for the merry response which had been given him by the light-hearted Bavarian girl. Alethea's brilliant smile came back to her at this call from him. Physically, they both were changed. The marks of suffering were on each of them; but joy was springing again from the depths of both their natures.

Hitherto, Hans had been very young for his age. Perhaps his small size made everyone inclined to treat him as if he was younger than he was, and this had kept him something of a baby. But while he was in bed, he grew all at once from babyhood to boyhood, and he became a boy who might well

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have been older than his eleven years. His mind had grown up.

Alethea was unexpectedly happy in this new phase of her life. In the past, although Hans had been her most precious possession, he was a possession which she had enjoyed comparatively rarely. His home had never been hers. She had been a visitor to the house where he lived. This was now over. It was obviously impossible to find another nurse for him, as every suitable girl would be doing war work; but Alethea felt that a mother was justified in looking upon her child as her first duty. She gave up the hospital and went to live altogether at Cairn Gorm.

Hans' education was making headway. Alethea now taught him most subjects, and she enjoyed the lessons with all her heart, her pupil was so quick, so alert, and so responsive. He seemed to find everything easy. Sums and latin he learnt with the vicar; but the chief thing in his life was his drawing. There was by now no doubt that he had a real gift; and fortunately there lived in the village a very remarkable painter. Mr. Crosby was a famous artist, and his studio was not half a mile from Miss Nash's little cottage. He immediately recognized the boy's talent, and he offered to give him lessons. These by degrees took more and more of Hans' time; and as the months passed, Alethea began to feel that in spite of his appearance,

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Hans might some day become a great man. At any rate, his life at this time was overflowing with interests, and his mother shared them all.

While she was nursing in the hospital, Alethea had spent all Nicholas's leaves with him in London. They stayed in a hotel, always running down to Brokeyates for a day or two, to picnic in the half-closed house. Those brief visits were like the bright intervals in a day of storm, when the sun shines with such abnormal brightness that it burns painfully. Their happiness had the intensity which only belongs to transitory things. And during those feverish days, always spent in unaccustomed places, and in circumstances unlike any they could have contemplated in the old days, Alethea often wondered what would happen when the war ended. They could never go back to the old life. Those years were carving in the lives of men and women, trenches deeper and more permanent than the trenches of France. They might in time be filled up. Flowers would bloom again upon the lacerated earth, and corn would grow; but in many human lives there must remain for ever a deep gulf fixed between the present and the past—a gulf across which a man would look back on to his youth, only to meet the eyes of a stranger, and a stranger who bore his own name. Surely Nicholas could not carry with him across that dividing line the bitterness which for so long had

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poisoned their lives. If he lived through the war, it could not leave him unchanged. He must at last feel the call of the blood between him and his child, and that call would be strong enough to make him forget the taint in it.

Each time that Alethea saw Nicholas, she felt more hopeful. This strange aloof man never achieved that camaraderie of spirit by which other men, often naturally uncongenial, discovered each other's qualities in those years of fighting. He could not make friends. Although he learnt to seem outwardly at ease, he remained lonely at heart in the friendliest mess. And so he longed more and more for the only human being who had ever got through his defences. He and Alethea were infinitely nearer one another since their lives had been so near shipwreck. Nothing now was hidden between them. She knew all there was to know about him, and she was the only person on earth who did. But, far from hating him for what she knew, she felt that she loved him better because she understood.

And now at last he was gaining the power to express to her the love and gratitude which he felt. He was less perversely inarticulate. No wonder Alethea felt that, if the war ever came to an end, it would find them happier than ever before.

Nicholas had some leave about three months after the beginning of Hans' illness, and Alethea

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was torn in mind as to what she ought to do. The child was quite well enough for her to leave him without anxiety, in the care of Miss Nash, and yet she was very reluctant to break, for a whole week, the constant companionship between herself and her son. She was terribly afraid that he might think that, like Greta, she had left him for ever. She resolved to go to London only for the day, and to try to persuade Nicholas to come back to Cornwall with her. She travelled through the night, and met her husband at the Grosvenor Hotel, where they had breakfast together.

Nicholas was shocked at his wife's appearance, for though she looked far better than she had, yet she had aged perceptibly, and the youth she had lost had gone for ever.

'You have been ill, and you didn't tell me,' he said anxiously.

'Not ill. But I wouldn't worry you by writing to tell you what we were going through. Hans was really alarmingly ill, and the whole thing was started by his nurse being sent off to an internment camp, as an enemy alien. It was a great shock to him, and then it was hard to nurse him without her. He was so used to her.'

'I hope you have a good nurse for him now.'

'Very, I think. *I* am the new nurse.'

She smiled at him.

'I have given up the hospital altogether.'

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'I am afraid your new job takes more out of you than the old one.'

'O no. I think the illness did, but now he is well, and everything is easy. Only, Nicholas dear, I want you to spend this leave with me in Cornwall. You must see Portia and . . . both the children. And I can't help being anxious when I am away.'

She tried in vain to prevent her voice from shaking; but its tremor touched him to the heart, making her more than ever lovable.

'Dearest, of course I will go,' he said, and he kissed her. In the turmoil and strain of the war, in the changed world in which they found themselves, he did not even realize what a crisis this conversation meant for Alethea. She felt that the bitter struggle of the past years was over.

They talked of many things as they travelled to Cornwall, but Alethea's thoughts were only of Hans and of his meeting with his father. Surely his charm would overcome the curse of the dwarf's blood.

Miss Nash's house was too small to receive another visitor, so Nicholas and Alethea were to sleep at the village inn, spending their days at Cairn Gorm. Portia was there for a week's holiday, very possessive about her father, who delighted in her beauty, and her vigorous erect carriage, the result of Miss Gough's excellent

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system of gymnastics. She would have made a glorious boy.

Nicholas had not seen Hans since the day when Alethea carried him away from Brokeyates to Friedenbach, and he had forgotten, as people do, how time had passed since then. So when the tiny figure burst from the house, and leapt into Alethea's arms with joyous shouts of welcome, he was at first quite fascinated by the baby, as for the moment he took Hans to be. He might have been a very captivating child of about four or five years old. Nicholas couldn't help smiling at the joyous apparition. The smile pierced Alethea through with a poignant joy, and she felt that Hans had conquered.

'Say how d'you do to daddy,' she whispered.

Hans hung his head, shy.

She put him down, and with a supreme effort of good manners, he walked stiffly to Nicholas and shook hands. Nicholas greeted him gravely.

'Isn't Hans tiny for his age?' said Portia, fearing that her superior height was not being appreciated. 'You would never believe, would you, that he is only one year younger than me?'

Alethea could have killed her daughter. She saw the old cloud come upon her husband's face.

'How old are you?' he asked the little boy.

'Twelve.'

It was incredible. Nicholas turned away, with a

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sigh which was almost a groan. The home-coming had been completely spoilt.

And then Miss Nash tripped out. She was the drollest figure. The little old lady had put on her best dress for the occasion, and its fashion was that of ten years earlier. Voluminous frills of lace streamed across the floor, held away from the feet in some mysterious way, and the sleeves too stood out from her shoulders by the sheer stiffness of their material. Round Miss Nash's neck was an amusing 'Toby' frill of pleated *lisse*, and an elaborate necklace of silver filigree rambled upon her bosom. Her very small shoes were almost buried beneath the very large rosettes which adorned them.

'Welcome to Cairn Gorm, Sir Nicholas. It is a great pleasure to me to see you here at last,' and as she shook hands, she sank backwards into the elaborate court curtsy with which it was her habit to receive strangers into her house.

It was a most welcome diversion.

'Supper is ready,' Miss Nash continued. 'Will you lead me in?'

Nicholas was unprepared for this formality, but he gave his arm to the little lady, and with great dignity they proceeded into the house, the others following them. Supper was served in Hans' playroom, which was now the principal living room of the house, and a delicious meal had been placed on the table. Miss Nash had cooked every-

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thing herself, and most of the dishes had been altogether produced on her little estate. The old-fashioned nosegays on the table gave a rural appearance to the room, and this was increased by the wide glass dishes of honey and home-made jam. The deliciously scented bread was baked in Miss Nash's brick oven, and she had herself made the butter and the cheeses from the milk of her own cows. Her eggs and chickens provided the staple courses.

She now seated herself at the head of the table with great self-possession, and Portia was called upon to say grace. This she did in a loud voice, her eyes tightly shut, and her hands placed together. There was no seat at the table for Hans, and while the rest of the party were taking their places, he had swiftly clothed himself in the costume of a very fantastic page-boy. This was his delight. Alethea had made him a scarlet Eton jacket, upon which she had sewn a collection of buttons of every shape and size, produced from Miss Nash's pre-historic work-basket. Hans was immensely proud of his 'livery' and he now proceeded to wait upon the party with consummate gravity. He was an excellent servant, his small size making his neatness of hand the more striking. His shyness completely vanished now that he had his definite part to play, and Alethea saw to her relief that Nicholas had quite forgotten his

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momentary gloom. He talked pleasantly with Miss Nash, and now and again he gave Hans a friendly smile, as he helped himself from the dishes which were handed to him.

Alethea took Hans to his bedroom directly after supper. She wanted, on that first night, to leave Nicholas with the impression of the little boy in his amusing fancy dress. She left her husband talking with Miss Nash and Portia and she sat with Hans till he went to sleep. At night, she went off to the inn with Nicholas, rather melancholy at the thought of leaving the children behind. She could hardly believe that after all these years, Nicholas had at last been persuaded to see his son.

The leave was not unalloyed pleasure. Nicholas was evidently trying to play his part conscientiously. He tried to be friendly with Hans, but he never saw the child at his best. Until his illness, the little boy had not known the meaning of shyness, but one of the consequences of that nervous break-down had been that he was now ill at ease with strangers. He was never altogether natural with his father, and never showed him the sparkling inconsequent gaiety which was his irresistible charm. This was not to be wondered at, for Nicholas too, when the child was present, was not at his best. That grim and lowering expression of his was never far away from his face, and this made him alarming. Their intercourse was

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always forced and unnatural. Portia did not mend matters. She enjoyed remarking on Hans' physical inferiority to herself, and whenever she drew attention to his small size, Alethea could feel Nicholas flinch.

But they were all together, and for the first time; and though it was almost a relief when the time came for Nicholas to go back to France, Alethea felt that the ice had been broken. She assured herself that things would now be every time easier.

CHAPTER XXII

NICHOLAS left the army in the spring of 1919, and Alethea had to decide what was to become of the children when she and her husband went back to Brokeyates.

This was easy as far as Portia was concerned, for that young lady had very definitely made up her mind as to her own immediate future. She was very happy at school, where she was now in the sixth form, was captain of the cricket eleven, and was a prominent member of the hockey and lacrosse teams. At the moment, it seemed to her that the world held no loftier heights to be scaled. Portia was stimulated by competition, and without being interested either in books or in games for their own sakes, yet her immense desire to excel made her succeed both in lessons and in sport. She had inherited, to a lesser extent, her grandmother's mental equipment—a hard business head, a practical turn of mind, and the gift of using the smallest circumstance for her own advantage. These are qualities which make for success both in business and in a completely organized school. Portia intended to go to Oxford

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when she left Penzance. Alethea would have preferred a daughter not entirely moulded to the pattern of school and college, but Portia made her understand that this was most re-actionary on her part. The poor girl was often forced to blush for her mother, as when Alethea came to see her at Penzance she showed a lamentable ignorance of many points of school etiquette, and she never could be persuaded to see how important they were, in spite of the explicit manner in which Portia pointed them out.

However, it seemed best to leave the girl where she was for the time, and a more anxious question was what should be done with Hans. Must he stay at Cairn Gorm? Obviously a boys' school was not suitable for him, as his school-fellows would not be slow to remind him that he was only about four feet in height, although they would possibly fail to appreciate that his every inch was beautiful.

Small as he was, he was perfectly formed. His face was oval, like his mother's, but otherwise he was not at all like either of his parents. His brown hair was almost yellow in some lights, and at other times, it was a dark chestnut colour. His pencilled eyebrows were clear and dark, and his eyes were of unalloyed gold, a colour which few people ever see or would recognize if they saw it. It is neither yellow nor green, and it is seldom found on earth, for it is one of Nature's deep and

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lovely secrets. It hides underground in the darkness of a mine, or it can be seen on the horizon in one short moment between the twilight and the dawn. Sometimes it shows faintly on a stormy day, when the sun's rays are reflected in a wet sky. And this rare colour looked out from under Hans' brown lashes. His mouth curved in a captivating fashion when he laughed, and his teeth were very beautiful. His head was of a curious peaked shape, and this made him look more elfin than ever. At Cairn Gorm, Hans was a delight to the eyes, but he would not be so at a boys' school. Alethea asked herself how he would appear at Brokeyates.

For it was her dream to take him home with her. She shrank from the thought of leaving him behind, and she hoped to persuade Nicholas to engage a tutor for him at Brokeyates. It was true that his lessons with Mr. Crosby were very valuable to him, but Alethea thought that another artist might be found to teach him at home. The whole thing hung upon Nicholas. What would he feel about it? During the last two years, he had spent all his leaves in Cornwall, and had grown accustomed to the appearance of his son. Alethea really did not know what his feelings were. He certainly now showed no actual aversion for the boy, but he also paid very little attention to him. But could she hope that he would tolerate the

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presence of the child at Brokeyates, the place which was his pride and his glory, while Hans was his disgrace? But, thought Alethea, whatever Nicholas may think, the place will come to Hans some day, and he ought not to grow up a stranger to it.

She met Nicholas in London on the day he was demobilized, and they went down to Brokeyates together. It was April. A faint green haze hung about the boughs of the willows which bordered the lake, and cowslips glowed softly over the turf in the Park. The war years had given to the place something of the lost neglected look which it had worn when Nicholas first saw it. Paths and flowerbeds were unweeded, and the nettles had begun to assert themselves again. But the house itself had not suffered. Nicholas had done his work of restoration too well for that. Its beauty caught at both their hearts.

A gardener and his wife were care-taking in the house, and only one housemaid had been engaged. The servants failed to hear the motor arrive, so that Nicholas and Alethea let themselves into the hall alone. The house was silent. The sun was already low in the sky, and it shone through the windows in the library, sending a long shaft of golden motes to play upon the leather bindings of the books. On their way, they passed through Alethea's hair, and played about her, as she sat in

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the great leather chair, her head erect, and her hands resting a little wearily upon its arms. Nicholas remembered that it was there that she had sat the first time she came to Brokeyates. Then it was her light youth which had captivated him, transient against the grave antiquity of the room. Now he saw that her youth had gone. In its place was a calm nobility, and her eyes seemed to hold memories as profound as those which hung about the walls of the room itself. A passion of tenderness took hold of him. He could not sit there, watching her, beautiful as she was in his eyes. He went to her and took her into his arms, holding her so closely that her beauty was invisible to him. But he felt it, in every fibre of his body, as he pressed her against himself, and kissed her again and again. It seemed like a new marriage, more sacred than the marriage of their youth.

The quiet evening lay about them. They wandered in the garden till the sun went down upon the plans they were making, and then they went back into the house. Each carrying a flat silver candlestick, they walked through all the rooms, loving everything they saw, and steeping themselves in the atmosphere of the place. It enveloped them, isolating them, while the world receded into forgetfulness, and they were alone. No one else could know this sense of Brokeyates which was common to them. They wanted no words to

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express it to one another. It was like a shared fragrance coming on a sudden breeze; or like the meeting of the eyes of two sufferers, who have endured tortures of thirst, and who at last drink together from a cool and brimming cup.

Alethea went to sleep feeling so happy, that when she woke up a few hours later, and heard the quiet breathing of Nicholas beside her in the dark, she was suddenly repentant. During those hours, she had forgotten Hans.

'And perhaps to-morrow, we shall not feel so near to each other,' she thought. 'I ought to have spoken this evening. He would not have said no.'

The thought disquieted her, and she threw herself restlessly about on her pillows. Nicholas woke up.

'Can't you sleep, my darling?' he said, his arm round her.

'I have been asleep,' she answered, uncertain whether to say more.

'How perfect to wake—at Brokeyates—and to find you here. Oh, my darling, I ask no more of life.'

And when he said this, she could not spoil his happiness by speaking of something which she knew must hurt him. She said nothing.

The next morning she knew she must speak. It was an effort, for she feared that Nicholas would not understand why it was impossible for her to

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acquiesce in the old arrangement, and leave Hans, unquestioned, with Miss Nash at Cairn Gorm.

She knew she could not do so. In the old days, she had taught herself to accept life at Brokeyates as a somewhat commonplace middle-aged affair, its outward occupations shared with her husband, and its innermost depths undisturbed. Hans had then been the holiday in that work-a-day world. Her visits to him had been joyous interludes when she had laughed and was gaily happy.

But now, both her husband and her son meant more to her; and the new complication of her life arose from the fact that they were each of them more necessary to her. Nicholas back from the war was again her lover. Romance had come to her again from France, its birthplace. She shrank from breaking the perfect relationship which now linked them. But, on the other hand, Hans had become her daily necessity. Never again could she agree to be nothing but a rare visitor in the house where he lived.

They walked in the garden; and all the time, with one part of herself, she was exulting in the knowledge that she and Nicholas were once more happy with the happiness which they had shared when first they married. But the other half of her heart was tugging at her, calling her back to Cornwall. Again and again she tried to speak of Hans, and each time she shrank from spoiling the

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enjoyment of this marvellous homecoming. She was not restrained by any fear for herself. It was that she could not bear to break in upon her husband's complete content. She saw that he was quite unaware of the struggle in her divided heart. And with every hour that she was silent, she felt herself disloyal to Hans.

After luncheon, they sat in the library, and began to talk about the future. They agreed that Portia should stay on at school, as she wished; and then Alethea spoke of Hans.

'I wondered if it would be possible to get a tutor for Hans, and let him go on with his lessons in this house. It seems unnecessary that he should have a separate household; and I don't like the thought of being away from him altogether.'

She was looking down, examining her finger nails, as if they suddenly had become extremely interesting. Nicholas was as nervous as she was. The air felt tense, as if thunder were suddenly near.

It was the last thing he expected her to say. He had grown so accustomed to Hans being away from home, that it seemed to him an unquestionable arrangement. The child was conveniently banished from his father's sight, and it had not occurred to Nicholas that for Alethea the situation might not be so satisfactory. He had never allowed himself to dwell on that aspect of the case.

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But, unprepared as he was, there was no doubt in his mind as to what was the only possible answer he could make. Hans must not come home. His presence would re-open the old wound, and would completely spoil the life which seemed beginning for himself and Alethea. And for what purpose? Nicholas assured himself that he had the child's welfare in his mind. Hans was in a place which suited his health, where he had excellent teachers, and where everyone around him was accustomed to his appearance. To bring him home would not only take him from the sea air and interrupt his lessons, but would expose him to the remarks of strangers who might not be kind to him. Nicholas himself recoiled at the thought of Hans being seen by people in the neighbourhood, and he made himself think that he was saving the child from this, when really his own feelings were his concern.

He hesitated before replying, not because he didn't know what he meant to say, but because he didn't know how to say it. He hated to refuse Alethea anything, however unreasonable, on their first day at home together. And too, he felt that usual sense of embarrassment which was always roused by the mention of Hans.

Alethea waited. Her breath came uncertainly.

Nicholas crossed the room to where she was sitting, and put his arm round her.

'Dear Alethea,' he said, 'I know you want to do

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what is best for the poor little chap; but he is far better off where he is. Physically, the sea is his only chance. That air may possibly even now develop his body. And we shall never anywhere else find such teachers for him. He has a unique chance with Mr. Crosby. It would be a disaster for Hans to give up those drawing lessons. I know we ought not to think of moving the child. It's a mistake for all children to have their lessons interrupted, but it is trebly so with Hans. I hate to make you unhappy, but we must not think of it. It is for his sake that I know it is impossible.'

Never since Hans was born had Nicholas spoken of him to his mother with such kindness and feeling. But only his manner was changed. Alethea knew that her husband was as inexorable as ever. She burst into tears.

CHAPTER XXIII

NICHOLAS gained his point as usual, and, as usual, Alethea gave in. This was because Nicholas was never in any doubt as to what he wanted, although he may have deceived himself as to his motives; while Alethea, all the time, had an enemy in the gate. She loved two people, and those two loves of hers were mutually exclusive. Her problem was to include them both in her life.

But this time, she did succeed in reaching a compromise. It was agreed that Hans should come home for the holidays, and this made him at once like any other schoolboy. It was really a revolution in the lives of them all. Hans was no longer ignored—his existence barely recognized. He was treated in the same way as the boys in all the neighbouring houses were treated.

And as time passed, Alethea realized that they had indeed found the best solution of their difficulties. If Hans had always been at home, the strain on them all would have been too great. Even now, when he only came to Brokeyates for a few weeks at a time, she knew that he was on his father's nerves, although the two did not often

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meet—Alethea saw to that. But when they were in the same room, Nicholas was at his worst—silent, sulky, morose; and Hans, who knew his father in no other mood, therefore became restrained and unnatural.

But now Alethea made it a practice that, when Hans was at Cairn Gorm, she should spend every week-end with him there; and thus she divided her life between her husband and her son.

Portia, after all, left Penzance before she was eighteen. In the last two years, she had grown up, and she found that the world of school was becoming too small for her. When she came back to Brokeyates for the holidays, she liked the position of daughter of the house, for she felt that it was a very important place, and that she, when there, was a very important person. Her University ambitions lost their attraction for her. She was tired of being educated; and she was quite sure that she already knew so much more than other people, there could be no need for her to learn more. She was also convinced that it is only in schools and colleges that wisdom and knowledge are acquired; and therefore it was plain that the world, and especially those people in the world who had not been at her school, could have nothing further to teach her.

Portia had at one time been Miss Gough's favourite pupil; but now she seemed to have out-

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grown the school, and the authorities unhesitatingly advised her parents that it was better for her to leave.

Portia was now a handsome athletic-looking creature, only an inch under six feet in height, and with a superb carriage. She held her head high, and moved with a swift easy balance. Her eyes were dark and deep-set like her father's, and her skin was clear and glowing. When she spoke she always gave her hearer something of a shock, for her voice was like a man's, startling in its depth and gruffness, and curiously unmodulated. It had in it so little inflection, that, whatever she said, she always seemed to be shouting across a wide space.

The Roxerbys were now far better off than they had been, for, after the war, Nicholas sold several of his outlying farms, and they went for high prices. They could therefore now live at Broke-yates in far greater comfort than they had known there, since he renounced his Australian fortune.

Owing to his prejudice against the master of the hounds, Nicholas had given up hunting ever since his marriage, but now Portia wanted to hunt, and her father was quite willing that she should. The girl knew nothing at all about horses; but she looked upon riding as the natural pastime of young ladies who live in large country houses, and she considered the hunting field as their right-

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ful playground. Moreover, she wanted to possess a horse of her own, before she invited any of her school friends to stay at Brokeyates. This was not because she looked forward to the pleasure of giving them a mount now and again. Far from it. She would invite no riders to stay with her. She wanted her guests to see her glory when she rode away, leaving them behind.

Portia was surprised to hear her father consult Alethea as to the choice of a horse. She had never seen her mother on horseback, and she had made up her mind that she was far too old-fashioned to know anything about sport.

'Don't ask mummy,' she said. 'Her idea of a horse will be a nice safe pony like the one the children rode on the sands at Penzance.'

'Your mother knows a good deal more about horses than you do,' said Nicholas.

'In theory of course,' Portia answered, with an indulgent smile. 'Parents are always supposed to know more about everything than their children do, because they have been in the world so much longer. But horses can only be understood by riding them.'

'And so you think that your mother was never a horsewoman?'

'Well, was she?' asked Portia, a little disconcerted by her father's enigmatic smile.

'I fell in love with her in the hunting field.'

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'Did you, my dear?' Alethea interposed. 'I thought you always told me that it was in the Spanish arm-chair in the library.'

'Your seat in both was equally perfect,' said Nicholas.

Portia chafed at the time wasted by these middle-aged and sentimental reminiscences.

'Anyhow I want a horse,' she said. 'And here I am with only an arm-chair to sit upon. Mummy seems to have had both when she was my age.'

'Of course you shall have a horse,' Nicholas said. 'Though you won't find it quite so safe a seat as that arm-chair. But it will do you good to have something which will give you a tumble now and then. You are so alarmingly grand.'

Portia thought that her father's jokes were distinctly clumsy; but she was ready to smile at them if they were accompanied by the gift of a horse, and she saw that he was quite prepared to give her one. And when it came, she found that it had been trained for polo. It was bigger than most polo ponies, as its last master had been a heavy man. Portia at once decided that she would adopt this dashing sport as her own particular game.

'You must have a good deal more practice in riding before you attempt polo,' said her father.

'You seem to have forgotten', Portia answered, 'that I used to ride when I was a little girl. Don't you remember that black pony we had? He really

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was a difficult little beast to ride. And one never forgets what one learns as a child.'

This last was the kind of platitude which always sounded original in Portia's ears.

'That old black pony?' said Nicholas. 'Of course I remember him, and I remember holding you on to his back. He was about thirty, wasn't he? And I believe he was blind and deaf and lame.'

'You evidently don't remember him at all,' said Portia, with ruffled dignity.

'I wonder who you will find to play with you,' Alethea remarked. 'I don't think that any of the girls about here are polo players.'

'I expect not,' said Portia disdainfully. 'I don't mean to play with girls. Too slow for me.'

'I expect the young men will find you a bit too slow for *them*,' said Nicholas teasingly.

'You will see,' Portia answered in tones of serene confidence.

'I probably shall,' said her father. 'And mind you are quick enough to see it too.'

'What a beast daddy is,' Portia said, turning pettishly to Alethea.

'Never mind. You will be able to laugh at *him* when you can play polo,' Alethea replied.

'I can now.'

And in spite of her father's derision, Portia did succeed in founding a Polo Club, and she appointed herself to be captain of the Brokeyates team. She

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collected quite a number of young men, who wanted some exercise when the hunting was over, and between them they made a very passable polo ground in the Park. It must be confessed that most of the club were somewhat disconcerted when they found that Portia meant to play herself. They had imagined that her interest in the game was purely altruistic; or, at any rate, that her sole share in it would be to collect audiences to applaud.

Nothing was further from her mind. Portia had never cared for any game in which she was not the chief player, and at school, her superior physique had given her an advantage over the other girls. She had never even seen a game of polo, though she had seen pictures of it in *Country Life*. She realized, of course, that the young men who played would know more than she did about the rules of the game; but as for the actual play, as soon as she saw how it was done, she had no doubt that she would be able to do it quite as well as any of them. And in any case, a woman alone, playing in a game with men, must find herself in an unrivalled position.

So the Polo Club was formed; and although the young men, by dint of a certain amount of strategy, did succeed in playing a good number of matches without her, yet, whenever Portia played, she was allowed to call herself the captain of the team; and

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the local spectators—many of whom were seeing polo for the first time—agreed that she was a wonderful player. She delighted in the compliments paid her by the members of the club, who wanted to use the polo ground, and who thought that a few pretty speeches to Sir Nicholas's daughter, were no very high price to pay for the privilege.

In Portia's eyes, the audience was the really important part of these games. She was aware of it all the time. It was mostly feminine—a few school friends whom she invited to stay in the house, and some chosen girls from the neighbourhood. They were herded together on benches behind a cord, and were barely introduced to the players. When the game was over, they were expected to find their entertainment in listening to Portia's conversation with the young men; and this generally consisted of uproarious chaff about things which were quite meaningless except to the speakers themselves. Thus she gave her friends the opportunity of learning how the great amuse themselves.

Alethea did not often come to the polo ground, but when she was there, she did her best to give all the guests the feeling of being included equally in the party. This, however, really made the girls feel even more 'out of it', for they saw that Portia's mother found it necessary to try to bring them in. No. Portia's parties were not popular with the

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girls of her own age, and yet she would never let them off coming. She knew how to make it very difficult to refuse an invitation given personally on the telephone.

Alethea was surprised, and rather amused, to find that Arthur Fanshawe had joined Portia's Polo Club. He had grown into a chubby childlike man of about forty-five; and, somewhat unaccountably, he had become *General Fanshawe*, in virtue of some mysterious prowess shown by him in the Remount Department. He had served in this throughout the war, and this fact made him, in Portia's eyes, undoubtedly an authority on polo. She considered him a most distinguished man, and very young to be a General. She was impressed by his weight, and of course she did not know that he had ever wanted to marry her mother.

Time had healed that wound; and Arthur, who was flattered by being looked upon as one of the smart young polo players of the neighbourhood, now felt no embarrassment about going to Broke-yates. He had occasionally met Nicholas and Alethea during the last year or two. They had not become intimate again, but the past was forgotten between them.

Nicholas sent a secret smile towards his wife when Portia announced her new recruit; and Alethea remarked that she thought that General Fanshawe would be a great success at ladies' polo.

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Portia looked uncertainly at her mother. She suspected irony—a manner of speaking which, like the voice of a bat, can only be detected by a sensitive ear. Portia sometimes suspected that her mother's words had a double meaning, but she never could see what it was. Now, she looked superior, and said nothing.

When Hans came home for the holidays, Portia was very insistent in her invitations to him to come and watch the polo. Her attitude towards her brother was at first sight contradictory. She had very little affection for him, and yet she wanted him to be at home. This was a survival of her childish pleasure in comparing her own height with his. She had enjoyed this when they were eleven and twelve years old, and she enjoyed it still. But it was not only in inches that Portia liked to measure herself against someone whom she knew she could outstrip. It gave her immense delight in other ways. She liked the society of people who did things less well than she did.

Now there were, of course, many ways in which Hans excelled his sister—in intelligence, in artistic power; even, if the truth were known, in beauty itself. But these were not aspects of life which were dreamed of in Portia's philosophy. As she herself expressed it, they were the pursuits of 'half-wits'; and the facts that Hans was both a brilliant painter and also a very intelligent young man,

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simply did not exist for her. What she reckoned was that he could play neither tennis nor polo; he could not ride; he did not dance. Portia wanted Hans to look on while she displayed her skill in these directions—directions too, all of them in which, as a boy, he might have been expected to beat her. To have him there, made her feel more than ever satisfied with herself.

Yet, every time that polo was played, Alethea contrived to have made some other arrangement for Hans. The holidays were a silent duel between mother and daughter, though neither of them would have admitted it even to herself.

Portia liked Hans to be seen by her friends, because she hoped they would be impressed by her superiority to her brother; while Alethea's aim was to keep him out of sight. But he must never know what she was doing. She had seen how her husband's life had been poisoned from the outset by the heartless scoffing of schoolboys who derided him because his mother was a dwarf; and she was resolved to save Hans from hearing such mockery directed against himself. At Cairn Gorm he saw no strangers. Everyone in the village had known him since he was a child, and they were all his friends. The artists whom he met in Mr. Crosby's studio did not measure him by his inches; they considered him as a great artist in the making. So the boy had grown up with none of the morbid

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self-consciousness which had made his father so unhappy a man. When he was at Brokeyates, Alethea was haunted by the fear that something might open his eyes. She set herself so to control events that Hans should never intercept upon the face of a stranger an expression which might suggest to him that he was tragically unlike other people. That he was different from the rest of the world he must indeed realize; but hitherto he had not learnt that this difference need be a defect. The boy was so accustomed to Nicholas's gloomy manner when they were together, that he had never connected it with himself. He accepted it as his father's normal disposition. It was true that Portia never failed to remind him that he was absurdly small for his age, but he measured nothing by her standards, and he simply did not care what she said. It was from a stranger, and even most of all from a kindly one, that Alethea dreaded the possibility of enlightenment for him. She had learnt from Nicholas that pity can scorch a proud and sensitive nature.

So without apparent intention on the part of any one, it always came about that on polo days, or on days when Portia had a tennis party, Hans had something else to do. He and his mother were off on one expedition or another. There was always something in the neighbourhood which Hans wanted to paint, and so he and his mother used

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to go away to sketch together, and it was Alethea who fixed the dates for these excursions. It was with consummate cleverness that she thus saved her boy from contact with strangers, and on these occasions she always knew that Nicholas would support her. He too did not want Hans to be seen.

CHAPTER XXIV

HANS had a large room at the top of the house which he made into a studio. It was a great attic, with white-washed walls, oak rafters, and uneven floor; and he amused himself by painting fantastic pictures all over the walls. Here, one Christmas holidays, he painted Alethea's portrait. No one was allowed to see what he was doing, and he and his mother loved the long secret sittings while Nicholas was out on the farm, or in the park with a gun, and while Portia hunted or played hockey. No one disturbed them, and they laughed and talked gaily together.

This picture was the best thing Hans had ever done. It was a quiet, restrained composition, the figure perhaps a little archaic, for he had put Alethea into a rather stiff uncomfortable-looking chair, with none of the easy lounging character of the chair of to-day. It was, however, the kind of chair she liked, and the pose was very typical of her. She sat with her long thin hands laid upon the arms of the chair, her back very straight, and her head rather rigidly poised above the strangely sloping shoulders. Hans had placed her where the

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light fell straight upon her—the cold wavering winter light with snow in its chill gold; and much of the beauty of the picture was in the painting of that subdued and distant sunlight as it fell upon her.

While he painted her, she watched his eyes. Their colour was incalculable. It changed every hour. Now it was clear green, and then, a few moments later, it made her think of cowslips drowned in liquid light. And Hans' expression varied with the colour of his eyes. Sometimes he might have been a pure visionary, his far-away gaze searching for the secrets which lie beyond the unreached horizons of the earth; and the next moment he was entirely absorbed in some detail of his picture—busy, careful, and concentrated. Then, all at once, an enchanting sauciness and fun peeped out of his eyes, and seemed the expression most natural to the odd slant in which they were set in his head.

It was two days before Christmas, and the post came late in the morning, so that Alethea's letters were brought to her in the studio. She had a pile of Christmas cards, which she saw with a groan, were mostly from people whom she had quite forgotten; and Hans had only one letter. It did not look interesting—a long business envelope with a foreign stamp. He did not open it, but he put it down beside him, and while Alethea looked at her

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letters, he hunted about for a tube of paint which he had lost.

'Did you get any letters?' Alethea asked at last.

'No. O yes I did, but I haven't opened it. It looks like an advertisement, and it comes from Melbourne.'

'From *Melbourne*?'

'It's a Melbourne postmark,' said Hans, picking up the envelope which he had thrown down.

'Give it to me,' said Alethea in a queer altered voice. With the name of Melbourne, there had rushed back into her mind all that had been most unhappy in her life. What could be the meaning of this letter to Hans? Who could have written it? Her anxious watchful spirit at once dreaded some move on the part of Mrs. Roxerby. Was she trying to insert herself into her grandson's life, and to give it that bitter twist which she had long ago put into the life of Nicholas? Alethea determined to keep the letter from Hans if she possibly could.

'I expect it is really for your father,' she said. 'You know he used to live in Melbourne. He had a business there. Let me see what it is.'

She took the letter, possessed by a wild desire to throw it unopened into the fire. She was resolved to keep that evil little woman for ever out of Hans' life; and who but she in Melbourne could possibly have known his name?

The letter was addressed to 'Hans Nicholas

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Archibald Roxerby'. Its writer must have made a study of the baptismal registers. There could be no doubt as to the identity of its sender; but Alethea wondered that even the malign curiosity of Mrs. Roxerby could have discovered all of Hans' names.

'Open it, and see if it is a Christmas present,' said Hans, busy mixing paints.

'I am afraid it doesn't look much like that,' said Alethea. She got out of her chair and went across to the fire. As she opened the envelope, she stood resting her foot upon the fender, and she held the letter towards the flames. She felt as if a viper might spring from it into the room.

It was a letter from a lawyer, and it told Hans that his grandmother was dead, and that she had left him the whole of her fortune.

Alethea felt dizzy. There swept over her the memory of the scene when that fortune had been renounced, and when that hateful little figure had stood in the library, and had mockingly demanded the child as well.

'It is a Christmas present after all,' she said faintly.

Hans looked up quickly, alarmed by the change in her voice. He put down his brushes and came to her.

'What is the matter darling? Are you ill?' he asked, his arm round her.

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'You had better read this letter for yourself,' she said. She gave it to him, and sat down rather suddenly.

Hans read it, completely mystified.

'What does it mean?' he asked. 'I didn't know that I even had a grandmother.' And then, as his eye fell upon Alethea's altered face, he continued:

'Tell me what it means. Do you mind so much that she is dead? Were you very fond of her?'

'Fond of her? No. No darling. I only saw her once.'

'Then why are you so unhappy?' He was dreadfully concerned, and the look in his mother's eyes drove out of his mind all thought of the fortune he had so unexpectedly inherited.

'She was not kind to your father. She made him very miserable when he was a boy, and to hear of her again reminds me of very depressing things. But they are all past. I am not unhappy now. In fact, I can't help feeling glad to know that she is dead at last.'

'It seems to be a very large fortune,' said Hans, looking again at the letter. He was beginning to realize that this was going to make a very great difference to them all.

'Yes. She was very rich.' Alethea said, 'A great deal of her money really belonged to your father, but he gave it back to her, for reasons which . . .

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I can't now tell you. Perhaps I had better show him the letter. May I have it? Though he has probably heard too that his mother is dead.'

She could not think how Nicholas would take this new development. She took the letter from Hans, and she went to find her husband.

He had heard nothing from Australia, and she handed him the letter without saying anything.

He read it silently.

After a few moments he said:

'It is the best thing she could have done. I'm thankful it didn't come to me, I shouldn't have known what to do. But it's fair that Hans should have it; and it will make things easier for the poor little chap.'

'I expect she wanted to make amends.'

'More probably she hoped she was punishing me,' he answered.

Portia took the news with none of the mixture of feelings with which her parents had received the announcement of Hans' fortune. She was delighted.

'What luck for you!' she exclaimed. 'Now you needn't paint any more.'

'Needn't paint any more? Why?'

'Can't you understand, my dear little idiot? You are so rich now that you need never do any more work. You won't have to have a profession.'

Hans laughed.

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'All the more time for painting,' he said.

'Hans, you are *potty*!' was Portia's answer to this. But Hans had grown in her estimation now he had become a rich man. He would henceforth be someone to be reckoned with, and not only to be ridiculed.

'You had better dash up to London in the motor and buy us all very grand Christmas presents,' she said.

Nicholas looked at her. He was fond of his daughter, but at that moment he disliked her. Still, how was she to guess at the repulsion he felt for the money which was to come from Australia. He certainly had no wish to benefit by it himself.

Two days later, when he came into the dining-room for breakfast on Christmas morning, there faced him, standing on an easel, the portrait of Alethea. He had not even known that she was sitting to Hans. He stopped short.

'This is a joint Christmas present from Hans and me,' said Alethea.

'We have done it between us,' Hans added.

The picture was a revelation to Nicholas. There it stood before him, and it seemed that a new living creature had leapt into being before his eyes. It was a fresh presence in his house, suddenly alive, and the unexpected vision gave him a shock of startled pleasure. But the picture conveyed to him something beyond its own individual beauty. It

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was his first sight of anything painted by Hans, and there was no doubt that it was something of a masterpiece. The picture had not only shown him the beauty of Alethea in a fresh aspect, but it had given him another son. Hans was revealed to him no more as the poor little dwarf of whom he had never ceased to be ashamed, but as a man whose genius could not be doubted. And yet, till now he had been blind to it.

A series of emotions crossed his face, as he stood looking at the picture. Alethea watched him, her arm round Hans' shoulder, and their two faces were lit with the fun of giving Nicholas such a surprise.

When he looked up, he saw them there, and his face was radiant.

'What a wonderful present!' he said. 'It makes me tremendously proud of you both—the painter and the model; and still more proud that this picture is mine.'

He came across to where they were standing, and he flung his arm simultaneously round them both. Then he kissed first one, and then the other, with an equal tenderness. He had never kissed Hans before.

CHAPTER XXV

HANS left Brokeyates a few days after Christmas. He was working very hard that winter, as Mr. Crosby had arranged that an exhibition of his work should be given in London in the spring. Alethea regretted his going, for she saw that, for the first time, Nicholas was ready to make friends with his son. That portrait seemed to have broken down a barrier; and after Hans had left, Alethea several times found Nicholas looking at the picture with a rather touching expression on his face. He seemed to be reaching after something which he knew he had missed, and which was symbolized by the portrait of his wife. One day she asked him what he was thinking.

‘I am enjoying the beauty of that picture,’ he said.

‘Yet you don’t look happy.’

‘Perhaps because it shows me something which you and Hans have found, and which I have always missed.’

‘It is yours now.’

‘I mean it to be.’

He pressed her hand and said no more; but in his

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wife's ears he seemed to have said a great deal. She felt that she had waited a lifetime for those few words.

Before Hans went back to Cairn Gorm, he gave Portia the Christmas present for which she had asked. It was a second hunter, so that she could now hunt an extra day in the week. At first she thought that it was because she had more days out, that the winter seemed so particularly enjoyable; but after a while she realized that each hunting day in itself had become unaccountably more pleasant. That feeling of exciting suspense with which she now went out every morning, was more acute than the mere anticipation of a good hunt. It was personal.

Portia liked admiration, and she had always had a good deal of it, for she was certainly a very handsome creature, especially on a horse. Yet there was something lacking in the kind of admiration she received. She knew that people thought her good looking, and yet her looks had never won lovers for her. She could always succeed in becoming the centre of a group, but she had never found herself the most important person in the life of any one individual.

And now she began to feel that she was; and it was a new experience.

For some time, she looked upon it as no more than a series of coincidences that when she wanted

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to go through a gate, General Fanshawe was so often there to open it for her. But as, time after time, they rode on together, often more engrossed in their own conversation than in the whereabouts of the hounds, Portia began to tell herself that this distinguished soldier was deliberately seeking her out. And as she realized this, she realized too that the young men of her own generation had far less judgment and poise than this new friend of hers, who, although still comparatively young, had achieved a position which gave to his least utterances the character of pronouncements. Portia liked confident assertions. She often made them herself: indeed she had no other idea of conversation.

It was over twenty years since Arthur Fanshawe had proposed marriage to anyone, and his single experience had not given him a relish for the practice. But with the passage of time, he had grown to remember that when he asked Alethea to marry him, he had merely done it to help her out of a scrape, and a scrape moreover in which the silly creature had been bent on entangling herself still further. He had even learnt to smile at the memory of the rebuff she had given him.

'A chivalrous young fellow I was in those days,' he would tell himself, 'although, boylike, I am afraid I did not hide from the girl that my own

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feelings were not involved. I expect she saw through me.'

He liked to remember that he had made this noble gesture, and he often thought that poor Alethea must regret more than he did that she had not taken the chance he had offered her. The prospect of marrying a millionaire had dazzled the poor girl; but she had discovered only too soon that the boasted Australian fortune had been nothing but a myth—a mere pretence on the part of the newcomer in order to give himself a good start in the neighbourhood.

Yes, the Roxerbys had not taken long to run through the fortune which had made such a sensation when Nicholas arrived. In fact, their subsequent poverty had caused just as much gossip later on. When Arthur first of all found himself thinking about marrying Portia, he asked himself whether this was not a recrudescence of the old chivalry. Was he once more the knight errant coming to the aid of the daughter of an impoverished baronet?

He need not have vexed himself. He was, in fact, in love for the first time. Portia's looks were very exciting to him, and he wanted her as he had never, in the old days, wanted her mother. This new desire gained in urgency from his consciousness that he was nearing fifty years of age: he felt

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that the season would soon be over when he might hope to gather rosebuds.

But the passage of time had made him cautious. He would not risk another refusal. He was therefore in no hurry to declare himself; although the fact that he was meditating this step made his presence curiously disturbing to the girl. It gave her a new kind of self-consciousness, and one that she found particularly agreeable. She felt Arthur's eyes upon her, and they affected her as she had never been affected by the open appreciation of her other admirers. There was something secret in his expression—something between him and her alone. The consciousness of it heightened her beauty when she was with him.

Tacitly, and unavowedly, each was plotting for opportunities of being with the other, and neither could be certain whether the other was acting deliberately or not. The situation was delightful to Portia, but Arthur found it too unsettling to be altogether pleasant after his years of completely self-centred bachelordom. In fact, it became at last unbearable. He knew that he must put his fortune to the test. He waited for an opportunity.

It came, as opportunities will. They had had rather a wasted morning, without the sign of a fox, and at last the hounds were put into a big covert which lay under the lea of a little hill. The

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General suggested to Portia that they should ride to its summit, as from there they could see at once on which side the hounds broke out. She agreed. and while the rest of the field waited about in the valley, the two moved off alone, as he had intended. On their way, they crossed a lane, in which they unexpectedly came upon a dancing bear and its leaders. Portia's horse sniffed, started, kicked up its heels, and set off at a gallop down the road. It looked very wicked, and as the General saw it go, he doubted, and with justice, whether Portia would be able to keep her seat. He rallied to the opportunity for a deed of gallantry, though he did not know quite what to do. Clearly, if he followed down the road, the clattering of hoofs behind it would only madden Portia's horse still further, and yet to await events too near the bear might frighten his own gentle steed. He therefore trotted down the field, on the opposite side of the hedge, but in the direction taken by Portia. He had not gone far when, with his heart in his mouth, he saw her horse leap over into the field a short way in front of him. It was riderless. He drew up, thinking it unwise to bring his own horse too near to any animal so completely out of hand, but to his relief he soon saw that it began to graze quietly a few yards away. Draped upon the pommel of the saddle was something ominously like a funeral pall. He dismounted, tied his own

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horse to a gate, and cautiously approached the runaway. He soon saw to his dismay that the object which had evoked such gloomy associations in his mind, was nothing more or less than the apron of Portia's safety habit. Filled with forebodings, he peered through the hedge and espied the girl lying by the roadside a few feet away, and clad only in her breeches.

Arthur Fanshawe was nothing if not a gentleman. He realized that the situation demanded not only courage but tact. He could nerve himself to catch the horse, and to disentangle the habit skirt from it, but it would be an awkward matter to approach a young lady in so embarrassing a *déshabille*. Still, it was obvious that no gentleman could leave her lying thus beside the open road. He approached the horse, addressing it in soothing tones. It paid no attention to him, but went on eating grass while he secured the habit skirt. Taking this in his two hands, he held it as a screen between himself and Portia, and thus carrying it, he went swiftly towards her and threw it over her knees. The action was performed with the courtly grace of Sir Walter Raleigh placing his cloak before the Virgin Queen; and, having achieved it, the General found himself kneeling beside a decently clad and recumbent figure. He gazed anxiously into Portia's face. She looked a little dazed, but did not seem to be in pain.

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'My dearest girl, where are you hurt?' he asked in real anxiety.

She opened her eyes and looked up at him.

'I feel a bit shaken,' she said, 'but I think there's no great harm done. I alighted on my sit-down-upon, and as I'm pretty well padded there, I expect no bones are broken.'

The General could not but blush at the saucy audacity of the modern girl; but he was modern himself, so he was not actually shocked by Portia's words. They did, however, slightly disconcert him, and for the moment he could not think of a suitable reply.

'Can't you get up?' he asked at last.

'I expect I can, but I don't feel exactly inclined to, as yet.'

She moved into a sitting position, leaning her back against the bank. He sat down beside her. In the distance they heard the sound of the hounds going away. The fox had broken out on the far side of the covert, and the hunt had left them behind.

'What has happened to our horses?' Portia asked.

'Tied up in the field. They are all right. You don't feel up to riding home yet, do you?' He obviously didn't want her to go.

'I'm quite comfortable here for the moment,' she answered, gratified by the rapturous gaze of those fat ardent eyes.

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'You would be wise to stay here quietly for a bit,' said the General, and he took one of Portia's hands between his own, and began to fondle it.

She made no effort to withdraw it.

His mind ran over the events of the past quarter of an hour. They were sharply telescoped together in dramatic confusion, and he hardly knew what had actually happened. He saw again the fiery eyes of Portia's horse as it made off; he heard the frantic clattering of its hoofs: he remembered how he had snatched the habit from the saddle: and now he was here, beside the girl whom he felt that he had rescued.

'I can never be thankful enough that I was here to save you when you fell,' he said; and he honestly began to believe that he had been.

Portia could not remember seeing him at the time, but she liked to think that this great man had gallantly risked his life for hers.

'I hardly remember what did happen,' she said. 'Tell me about it.'

'You must have lost consciousness for a time.'

'I believe I did.'

'It was indeed a miraculous escape,' said Arthur fervently.

A few minutes earlier, Portia had thought that she remembered slipping sideways off her saddle when her horse had swerved suddenly towards the field. Now she realized that she must have been

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delirious. The truth was obviously far more exciting. She must have had a terrific accident which had made her unconscious, so that she had forgotten the details of her valiant rescue by the General.

'Do tell me the whole story,' she said. 'I can't remember anything.'

'There's not much to tell,' he answered modestly. 'I expect you hardly saw that brute of a dancing bear which set your horse off. (By the way, those scoundrelly gypsies have not heard the last of this.) Well, off you went, at a wild gallop down the lane, and I saw at once that no woman could control an animal so maddened with terror. I shall never forget that sight. I wish I could. He went like the wind, his nostrils dilated, his eyes glaring, and every nerve in his body at strain. I felt at that moment that there was no hope for your life, and . . . God knows what that meant to me,' he added in a lowered tone. He could not continue, but he silently pressed the hand which was still clasped in his; and then, bending gently over it, he kissed it very reverently.

Portia was deeply moved.

'He has saved my life at the risk of his own,' she thought. This was indeed a wonderful adventure.

'Go on,' she murmured. 'I want to hear everything. What did you do?'

'My part was a very unimportant one,' he

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replied, and this, at least, was a candid admission. 'I could not follow you down the road, as the sound of my horse's hoofs would have terrified your horse still more. But I saw in what direction you were being carried, and I set off across the field to cut you off. Mercifully I was in time. I heard you coming down the lane. I dismounted, and waited. It was a sight to make the stoutest heart quail. You were still sitting magnificently, your head thrown back, your balance perfect; but that beast was beyond the power of human hands to control. I waited for you, and saw the frenzied creature give a violent swerve and rise at the hedge. You were within an inch or two of those murderous stakes.' Here he pointed towards some sharp stakes which stood up out of the hedge, and must inevitably have torn the inside out of any horse or rider. 'My heart stood still,' he said, 'but I did my little best. Just avoiding his hoofs, I caught at his bridle, and succeeded in dragging him a foot or two to one side. He just missed the stakes, and jumped into the field. As you passed me, I caught you in my arms, and dragged you from the saddle. My part was nothing.... Nothing. . . . But you are safe.'

He could say no more. His voice vibrated. This thrilling scene had indeed been enacted in his mind as he rode down the field after Portia; and now he lived through it. It had surely happened.

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Portia was immensely excited by the story. This was indeed a hunting accident on the grand scale, and with a most romantic termination.

'How *can* you say your part was nothing when you have saved my life? And you might easily have been killed yourself.'

'I could have asked nothing better, if I had been too late to rescue you. My life would then have had no value left for me.'

He paused after these words, to allow their full import to go home.

Portia was silent.

'He's going to propose,' she was thinking. 'I must not say anything which might put him off.'

'Dearest Portia,' said Arthur, when the silence had been given time to make its full emotional effect, 'I must speak. What I am going to say has been long in my mind, but the past half hour has taught me that I can risk no longer delay. I have felt a diffidence about asking you to become my wife, because I am only too well aware of the difference in our ages. It seemed impossible that you should love one who is so much your senior. And yet . . . I flatter myself that the years of my life may have given me something more worthy of your acceptance than could be offered you by some thoughtless youth who still has his spurs to win. I did my little part in the great war. My life has not been altogether without its distinction.

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Such as it is, I offer it to you. Will you link your own with it?'

'But I have never thought of you as an old man,' said Portia graciously.

'No. Probably not. Certainly hardly as an *old* man. But still I have more years to my credit than you have.'

'I have always thought you so wonderful, to be so young, and to have done so much.'

'Then you don't think it would be altogether impossible . . .?'

'It would be altogether impossible to say NO,' said Portia archly.

He drew her to him.

'Then you do love me?' he said.

'Yes,' she answered, and was folded into his arms.

He realized that he was passionately in love.

CHAPTER XXVI

‘**W**HAT *are* we to do about it?’ said Alethea. She put down the letter from General Fanshawe which Nicholas had given her to read, and she gave her husband a look in which horror struggled with amusement. The General had brought Portia home the previous afternoon, and had very modestly withdrawn before she had had time to tell her parents the story of how he had saved her life. Before they reached the house, the lovers had agreed that the actual request for Portia’s hand should be made to her parents by letter. This somewhat formal demand gave an added dignity to the proposal, and Portia felt that it had become almost royal in its procedure.

Alethea had put her daughter to bed when she got home, and had sent for the doctor. No injuries could be discovered, and as the accident had apparently been very nearly a fatal one, it seemed that Arthur must have shown great courage and readiness in emergency. Nicholas and Alethea could neither of them help being rather surprised when they heard of his gallantry, and they felt that they had perhaps misjudged him in

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the past. He was after all a plucky old fellow for his age.

And now came this pretentious and pompous proposal, which proved that the gallant General was still the Arthur Fanshawe of old days.

'We *can't* allow her to marry that old woman, can we?' Alethea exclaimed.

'You mustn't call him an old woman this morning, when only last night we decided that he was after all a most dashing young fellow.'

'I know. But now I begin to disbelieve that story altogether. He can't have done all that, and then go home to write a letter like this. Think what a terrible husband he would make.'

'What will she say about it?' asked Nicholas.

'He says here that she has accepted him,' said Alethea, turning back to the letter, which she still held in her hand. 'But I must say I think it was unfair of him to propose to her, as he must have done, just after he had saved her life—or after she thought he had. What could she say but Yes? But if *we* agree, I shall feel that I'm taking part in the slaughter of the innocents.'

'Don't affront a young lady of the twentieth century by calling her an innocent.'

'But really, she can't know what he is like.'

'She has seen a good deal of him,' said Nicholas. 'I think before we discuss it, we must find out what she does feel about him.'

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'I have a certain diffidence about approaching the subject, after my own lurid past with her adorer,' said Alethea, with a grimace.

'To us it seems farcical enough,' said Nicholas, 'but she may not agree with us. And I believe he is serious.'

'I'm sure of it. He never could be anything else, especially where he himself is concerned. But whatever Portia says, I really don't think we *can* allow it. Could one condemn a daughter to a fate which one couldn't possibly contemplate for oneself?'

'That's quite another thing. You were not in love with him, and you seem to have told him so pretty plainly.'

'But can she be?'

'You must ask her that.'

Alethea did not like the prospect, but she went to find her daughter.

Portia was waiting for her, her face lit with a proud smile of self-satisfied anticipation. To Alethea her attitude was almost incredible. She had not imagined that Arthur could appear to anyone as anything but the buffoon which she and Nicholas had always considered him. In their eyes, he was simply ridiculous. And here was Portia, their own child, living under their own roof, and accepting this absurd creature at his own valuation. She took him as seriously as he took

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himself, and was immensely proud of her conquest. Alethea advised that the engagement should not be announced immediately, but that Portia should first give herself time to know the General a little better than she did, but this suggestion was received with scorn. Portia explained that superficial as Alethea's own acquaintance with General Fanshawe might be, one gets to know a man very differently directly he is in love with one. It was an intimate understanding of this kind which existed between Portia and her admirer. Alethea hesitated as to whether she ought not now to admit that she too was not without experience of Arthur in love; but she felt too much ashamed to confess it. She could only say that perhaps Portia's feelings were more those of gratitude than love. It would be difficult to feel altogether indifferent towards a man who had just saved one in a horrid accident, and yet that emotion might not be the love which would last a lifetime.

'I am not the kind of person to be carried away by sudden emotion,' said Portia, in her most superior manner. 'And as a matter of fact, we have cared for each other for some time. To you and daddy it is probably a surprise, but I have known for a long time that this was coming.'

She made Alethea feel very young and inexperienced, and quite unworthy to give advice

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to so mature a person as her daughter. Portia insisted that it was quite unreasonable to think of any postponement of the engagement. She intended immediately to wear an engagement ring.

Arthur had the grace to appear somewhat embarrassed when he first approached Alethea in the capacity of a prospective son-in-law, but she was obviously ready to allow their earlier relationship to fall into oblivion. He guessed that she now looked upon her refusal of his offer as one of those youthful mistakes which most people try, for their own peace of mind, to forget. Her manner was staidly parental; and while Nicholas discussed business with Arthur, she sat by with a quiet aloofness which might have disconcerted a more sensitive man, but which Arthur interpreted as the expression of matronly satisfaction. There seemed to be no valid reason for refusing to consent to the engagement, so Portia was not denied the gratification of appearing in the neighbourhood as the heroine of what seemed to her to be a very romantic love affair.

Meanwhile, Hans was having a busy winter. When he got back to Cairn Gorm, and turned over the canvases which had given him such delight in the painting, each one of them seemed to him incredibly childish and amateur. The only ones he liked were those which he had just finished,

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or those upon which he was still actually at work; and he wanted to throw out everything else, and to paint an entirely new set of pictures for his exhibition. He was filled with apprehension at the thought of his work being shown to the critical world, and he almost quarrelled with Mr. Crosby, who insisted that the final selection of the pictures to go to London should rest with himself. He thought that the actual development of the boy's talent was both remarkable and interesting, and he meant to show, not only Hans' latest work, but a series of studies which would make a record of his student life. For by now, Mr. Crosby had no doubt that his pupil was on the way to becoming a really great man. And his style was already very mature for his age, as from the time he was ten years old, he had worked steadily at the technique of his art, and had never been allowed to waste his time.

The exhibition opened early in May, but Hans did not go to London for it. He was really exhausted by his strenuous work of the past months, and he was glad to go to Brokeyates for a rest. But, in any case, he felt nothing but horror at the idea of being in the gallery to overhear the remarks of strangers about his pictures. He preferred to stay in the country, and forget, if he could, that they were being shown.

This decision accorded with Mr. Crosby's desire.

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He didn't want Hans in London. He hoped that the pictures would be judged on their own merits, with no personal bias to influence opinion. He gave no information as to the age of the artist, or as to his family. Hans' address did not appear in the catalogue. And above all, Mr. Crosby was determined that no one should know that the pictures were painted by a dwarf. If this had been known, Hans would have had no chance of being looked upon as anything but a curious freak.

Even Alethea did not know whether Hans realized what a sensation he would have made if he had appeared in the gallery. No one knew his secret feelings about his small size. He never spoke of it, and never seemed to give it a thought, while it was not easy to judge whether he was shy or not, for he so seldom saw any strangers. He lived among people who were so accustomed to his appearance, that they really forgot that there was anything unusual in his being hardly four feet high. He had therefore never been made self-conscious.

But he was sincerely modest about his work, and he was, accordingly, quite unprepared for the success of his exhibition. The serious critics were enthusiastic about his pictures. As Hans read the notices in the papers, he found to his amazement that he was spoken of as an artist on the way to a place in the first rank. The pictures

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which he had painted in his far-away studio in Cornwall had made him famous.

It was a wonderful and an unexpected happiness. Hans had always painted because he loved it, and all his life he had been singularly unconcerned over the world's opinion of himself. He simply hadn't thought of it. But now that it was suddenly declared, and proved to be so unexpectedly eulogistic, he was delighted beyond words. And the most joyful part of his triumph was the gratification which it gave to Alethea. How they enjoyed it together!

During the following week or two, Hans was inundated with letters from artists and critics, who wrote to tell him of their admiration of his work. No one knew who he was, or where he lived, but Mr. Crosby was the medium through whom these letters reached Hans. Many of them were from men whose names were well-known to him, and whom he looked upon as immeasurably above him; and now he found that they wrote to him as to a brother artist. Hans, who had thought himself nothing but a schoolboy, found that he was admitted to a new world. The posts became the great events of the day, and each one brought him some exciting letters.

Nicholas was not at his ease during these days, although in his heart he was extremely pleased about his son's success. From the moment when

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he saw Hans' portrait of Alethea, his feelings towards the boy had been completely changed. That picture had been a revelation to him. This pitiable child of his, who, because of his small size, had never seemed to him to have grown out of babyhood, had suddenly appeared as a man with a life of his own, and a life too, which would play a part in his generation. He was no more the poor little dwarf to be hidden away out of sight. Nicholas had ignored him, but on that Christmas morning he had seen that Hans was no more a person to be ignored.

But there was more in it than this. Nicholas not only found himself recognizing the talent of his son: that portrait of Alethea revealed to him something more. It made him aware of an unexpected sympathy between himself and the boy. Hans saw Alethea as Nicholas thought that he alone had seen her. He had divined in her that hidden beauty of spirit which lay behind the beauty she showed to the world; and it was this dear and secret loveliness which Nicholas saw expressed in the portrait. It drew him to Hans.

But he had found it difficult to say any of this to the boy. It was never easy for him to speak of his inner feelings, and the long reserve between himself and Hans was hard to break down. Before he had made up his mind to speak, Hans had gone back to Cairn Gorm.

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Now he had come back, recognized by the world. Nicholas's pride rebelled against choosing this moment for a change of attitude. It must appear, he thought, as if he had been influenced only by Hans' public success.

So he remained aloof, and even seemed rather glum, much to the disappointment of Alethea, who had thought that Hans' happiness must at last break down his father's defences. She saw, instead, what almost seemed like jealousy over the boy's acknowledged genius. Here, she misjudged her husband, but for once she was not able to follow the subtleties of his mental state. She had known how delighted he had been with the picture of herself, but what she did not know was that Nicholas had regretted his inability to tell Hans what he felt about it. It was the one blot on her own happiness.

And at Cairn Gorm, Miss Nash was more delighted than anyone. She was now an old woman, and one by one, her many household activities had been taken over by Greta, who had returned to Cornwall as soon as the war was over. And as the old lady was able herself to do less and less, the achievements of Hans became more entirely the interest of her life. She admired everything that he did, and for the past ten years she had been waiting for the time when the world would admit that her foster-child was the greatest

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artist of his day. As she read the criticisms in the papers, she felt that she had at last been proved right. The world had recognized in Hans what she had always seen in him.

Miss Nash was surrounded by neighbours who cared for her, and she had quite a triumph of her own over Hans' exhibition. Never before had so many carriages and motors stopped at her door, for everyone in the country round seemed to come to congratulate her. She had never before worn her black silk dress for eight afternoons in succession; but, as she said to Greta, every day in that week was a party day.

And at the end of this stream of visitors, there arrived a young man who was a stranger to her. He appeared at first a little diffident about coming to see her without an introduction, but he was soon drinking tea out of her best china teacups, and chatting away as if he had known her all his life. He said he was staying in the neighbourhood, and had not been able to resist calling upon her, in the hope of seeing Hans himself, and expressing to him some of the admiration felt for his work by a man of his own generation. The stranger was evidently a hero-worshipper, for he was interested in every detail about Hans, and was full of sympathetic questioning. Miss Nash took him into Hans' studio, and she could not help being flattered by her guest's whole-hearted admiration of those

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old water-colours of her own, which still hung upon the walls. It was delightful to talk of Hans with someone who did not already know all there was to tell, and Miss Nash thoroughly enjoyed her afternoon. She showed her visitor many photographs of Hans, as well as sketches she had made of him at every age; but, as she said, not one of them gave any idea of what an exquisite little being he was.

CHAPTER XXVII

ALETHEA came one morning into Hans' studio at Brokeyates and found him reading a newspaper. He did not look up as she opened the door, and she was alarmed by the expression on his face. He was very white, and in his eyes she saw a bitter misery which made him, for the first time, remind her of his father.

'What is it, dearest?' she asked, crossing to him, and putting out her hand for the paper.

He held it away.

'No,' he answered.

She sat down on the arm of his chair.

'But I want to see it,' she said; and again she laid a hand upon the paper.

'Don't look at it,' said Hans. His voice was deep and strangled.

She said no more, but she took the paper from him and carried it to the window. Standing there, she read it. It was one of those cheap newspapers which seem to exist in order to interpose a perverted parody of life between their readers and the perception of truth. One side of a sheet was entirely occupied by an article about Hans. The page was broken up into short paragraphs, each introduced by a head-line in very large print.

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Alethea saw:

MYSTERY OF UNKNOWN ARTIST
SOLVED
CORNISH DWARF GENIUS
TINY PAINTER OF GREAT PICTURES
BARONET'S DWARF HEIR PAINTS
PICTURE OF THE YEAR
MODERN TOM THUMB'S MASTERPIECE
NATIVE OF LILLIPUT TAKES
LONDON BY STORM

She felt sick. She hastily ran her eye over the article, and saw that it was, from first to last, a description of Hans, not as an artist, but as a freak. Nothing was omitted. His exact height was given in inches, and he was said to feel so acutely the fact of his diminutive size, that he had always hidden himself from the world, painting his pictures in a remote cottage on the coast of Cornwall, where the walls of his studio were hung with the portraits of other mis-shapen little objects.

Alethea looked back at Hans. He was still sitting in the same attitude of complete dejection, and as he sat there, he did indeed look a pathetic little dwarf. The life had gone out of him—that radiant vitality which usually shone about him like a swift emanation of light, making Alethea, at least, forget when she was with him whether he was measured by inches or by feet. She always

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saw the spirit in him. Now that spirit was crushed, leaving him only a crumpled little midget, his feet dangling absurdly far from the ground as he sat in the deep arm-chair.

She went back to him, and put a hand upon his shoulder. He did not move, but, still staring gloomily into space, he said:

'Is being a dwarf the only thing that counts?'

'Only with people who don't count, like second-rate journalists.'

'People who don't count! And who does count? Most people agree with . . . *that*.'

'My dear boy, *nobody* does.'

'What about Daddy and Portia?'

'No darling.'

'Don't say "No darling"'. You can't deceive me any more. But what a fool I must have been all these years, if nothing but a newspaper like that could open my eyes for me, and show me that I'm nothing but a freak. O Mummy, you've been an angel, making my life into a Paradise; but *why* did you do it? Didn't you know all the time that it was only a Fool's Paradise, and that I was bound to wake up some day, and learn the truth?'

'Hans, you *can't* consider what is said by a vulgar writer like this. You mustn't. Remember what the real critics have said. You *have* "woken up to learn the truth", and it is that you are compared with the great men of the past.'

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'With Tom Thumb!'

'By someone who has never seen you or, I should think, any of your work.'

'No. Of course it isn't that I care what is said by this particular man. But it has shown me what I must look like in the eyes of everyone but you. I see now why daddy has always hated me. He is ashamed of me, and no wonder. Portia once called me "a disgrace to the family", and that's what daddy feels.'

'No darling,' said Alethea again.

'Don't go on saying "No Darling". I can't bear it. It shows me that you haven't got anything else to say. I ought to have known it all my life. The sight of me has always made him miserable. He has never tried to hide it.'

'Hans, you are quite wrong,' Alethea tried to say.

'No mummy, it's because of me that he has always looked so unhappy. I can't think of his face now, without realizing what he feels every time he sees me. Heavens! How he must hate me!'

'Listen Hans. You *must* hear what I have to say. It's true that your father has been an unhappy man, but that's a far older story than *your* life. It goes back to the time before he and I were married. I think it was one of the things that made me fall in love with him—that he looked so lonely and sad. And it has been the battle of our married life, trying to conquer a melancholy which began

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when he was a boy in Melbourne. His mother was a cruel woman, and she started him with a prejudice against the world. But far from this trouble coming from you, he has been gradually growing out of it all the time that you have been growing up. *You* can't possibly tell how much better he is; but it does prove, to me who have known him all along, that it is not caused by you.'

Hans looked up at his mother, and she knew that she had impressed him.

'Still, the sight of me must have added considerably to his gloom,' he said with bitterness.

'It will do so, if you go on looking as gloomy as himself at his worst.'

'What an egoist I must be, never to have thought what I must look like in the eyes of the world.'

'What an egoist you will be if you begin to think about it now!' she said, caressing his hair.

He took the paper, which had fallen out of her hand onto the floor, and he looked at it once again. Then he dropped it with a groan.

'*"Baronet's Dwarf Heir"*, Oh, poor daddy!'

'*"Paints Picture of the Year"*, Oh, happy mummy!'

'It's no good mummy. You can't make it into nothing. That hateful paper has opened my eyes, however much I may despise it in itself. I now know that daddy does mind terribly, and always has minded.'

'Don't imagine that a vulgar journalist can

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explain your own father to you. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.'

She tried to smile, and to treat the subject with a light-hearted raillery.

'I *am* ashamed of myself,' was what Hans replied, and once again she saw his father in him.

She drew his head down upon her shoulder.

'Darling Hans,' she said, 'I know that this must hurt you quite horribly. You have never before come against this coarse and vulgar side of the world. But don't make it worse for yourself, and too frightful for me, by thinking that this man can tell you what your own people think of you. Don't you know, my darling, how beautiful you are in my eyes? You can never, never, understand how completely you have always made the joy of my life. When daddy's old misery was nearly breaking my heart and his, it was only you, my beloved boy, who never failed to make me happy. Hans, I can't bear it if these things, written by a stranger and an outsider, are going to come in upon us, and cloud our lives together.'

Her voice shook. She could not go on. She struggled with herself, for it seemed that after all the years in which she had screened him from the world, she was now going to break down when the enemy was upon them.

'I wish I could despise it,' he said.

'You will,' she answered, conquering the vibra-

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tion in her voice, and putting into it all the decision she possessed.

He saw the tears in her eyes, and he suddenly realized that he was making his mother even more unhappy than he was himself.

'I expect we are taking it too seriously,' he said.

She smiled down upon him.

'I know we are. We have been spoilt by all the lovely things that we have been reading about you all this time.'

'I shall throw the hateful paper away, and let us go for a walk.'

Alethea gladly agreed, and they walked in the Park till the gong sounded for luncheon.

Arthur Fanshawe had come over, so Portia was in high spirits and very talkative.

'My dear Hans,' she said almost at once, '*have* you seen the article about you in the *News monger*? Isn't it a scream!'

'Yes, I saw it,' said Hans. His voice was dead, and he spoke as if the subject did not interest him.

'I thought it was frightfully funny,' Portia went on. 'And I can't imagine how they found it all out. Very clever of them, wasn't it? And my dear, how killing about those ridiculous paintings of poor old Miss Nash's. They are evidently supposed to be portraits of your ancestors.'

Till now, Alethea had not known whether Nicholas had seen the obnoxious article, but now

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his face showed her that he had. He was watching Hans, who was very white, although red patches had appeared here and there upon his face and neck. Alethea tried in vain to think of something which she could say to create a diversion.

'Yes my boy. This is fame at last. A whole page in the *Newsomonger*,' said Arthur, with a heavy attempt at jocularitv.

'Who in the world reads such things?' Nicholas now broke in, showing very obvious annoyance.

Portia was quite unaffected by her father's irritation.

'We all do of course,' she answered pertly. 'And you have evidently read it as much as any of us, in spite of your trying to be so superior about it.'

'Whether you have read it or not, it's not worth talking about,' Alethea intervened.

'It doesn't seem very important,' said Hans. He was still bent on appearing indifferent.

Alethea felt that Nicholas had made a sudden movement. She heard his foot strike on the floor under him. She saw his hand clutch the edge of the table. She was suddenly frightened. The look on his face brought back to her mind two scenes in his life, the times when she had seen him lose control—when he had been beyond himself with fury. She remembered how he strode up the path to knock on the door of the Warrens' cottage; and

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she saw again his face when he stood over his mother, as if he meant to kill her.

No one else was looking at him. Hans' eyes were fixed on his plate. His face was rigid, and only its curious pallor and the rapid movements of the blood under the skin, betrayed that he was suffering. Portia and Arthur felt nothing ominous in the air. They had both been amused by the article in the paper, and they thought it was good fun to tease Hans about it.

'Poor Hans,' said Portia. 'It is really bad luck on you that you are such a tiny little thing. It gives the papers a chance, doesn't it. And you are the only small member of the family. It's very odd, because we are such a tall race.'

She was looking across the room at a looking-glass which hung upon the wall, and she was proud of what she saw there. It was a direction in which she often turned her eyes.

Then Nicholas spoke, and to Alethea's surprise his voice had seldom been more serene.

'You evidently don't know much about the family history, Portia,' was what he said. 'There have been several dwarfs in it. My own mother was one. But it is the small people who always have had the brains, while the tall ones have been fools. My mother was the most hard-headed woman I ever knew; and now comes Hans, to make us all feel small beside him.'

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He gave Hans a smile of real affection, and laid his hand affectionately upon the little fist which was clenched upon the table.

'Small beside Hans!' exclaimed Portia. 'How ridiculous. I could never feel that.'

'Possibly not. But I shouldn't boast about it, if I were you,' said her father drily.

'But it isn't true, is it, about the dwarfs in our family?'

'Indeed it is.'

'Then why have I never heard about it?'

'That I cannot say,' said Nicholas.

His tone was final. He meant the subject to be closed, and even Portia did not like to continue it.

Alethea listened as if she was in a dream. This was the subject upon which Nicholas's morbid mania had always compelled a miserable silence, and here he was handling it with a lightness which was altogether unlike his usual manner. And he had said the only thing which could eradicate Hans' suspicion that his parents really looked upon him with the same eyes as the *Newsmonger* writer. He was not after all a 'disgrace to the family', but one of its normal types. In fact Nicholas had spoken as if he were almost proud of his dwarf relations. And the easy way in which he spoke, with a smile that was slightly mocking as he looked at Portia, and that became distinctly tender when he turned to Hans, made it impossible

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for the boy to continue to think that he had ever been the cause of his father's gloom. Nicholas had put the subject into its right proportions.

As they all went out of the room after luncheon, Alethea saw that Nicholas had thrown his arm across his son's shoulders, and they were talking easily together. They had found each other.

She went upstairs to her bedroom. The weight of her long struggle had been taken off her, and yet it seemed now to come back upon her and to crush her for the first time. She lay down upon her bed and sobbed convulsively.

She lay there for a long time, and when at last Nicholas came to find her, she did not hear his footsteps till he was in the room.

He sat down on the bed beside her.

'Do you really care so much about that stupid newspaper?' he said, taking one of her hands and playing with its fingers.

'No. Indeed not. But Hans minded so terribly at first, and I felt helpless. It seemed that whatever I said was magnifying it. You knew just what *not* to say.'

'I have been through the mill.'

She pressed the hand which still held hers.

'What made him so miserable was that he thought that we—you and I—must always have seen him in that way too,' she said.

'I almost did, in the old days; because, like the

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newspaper man, I never really did see him.'

'And now you will be happy, because you do see what he is.'

'Yes, I am tamed at last,' said Nicholas with a laugh which covered real embarrassment. 'And I now see what a fool I have been all this time. But I don't think I should ever have known quite how much of a fool, if I hadn't seen poor little Hans' face when Portia was teasing him at luncheon. I realized then that he was feeling all that I used to feel at school; and then I knew that I had allowed my life to be made permanently miserable by what those horrid little boys had said. It made me determine that *his* life shouldn't be spoilt in the same way. And directly I began to speak, I found that there was nothing so very terrible about it after all. It had become so, because I had made it into something which couldn't possibly be spoken about. I had turned it into a disgrace by treating it as one.'

'My poor Nicholas,' said Alethea.

He kissed her: and with that kiss there seemed to come a reversal of their relationship, for now it was he who resolved to banish from her the haunting of the Dwarf's Blood.

They went downstairs together, and into the Library—that room so full of memories for them both. Here, it always seemed to Nicholas that he had seen Alethea for the first time, for he had

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never really known what she was like till a ray of sunlight showed her to him there. Here, the horrible apparition of Mrs. Roxerby had broken in upon them, tearing them apart. Here, they had begun their life again together, after the war. Now they went there in search of Hans. The room was empty. Alethea crossed it, and stood looking into the garden, while Nicholas watched the light shining from her eyes.

‘I think I must commission Hans to paint a new picture for the ceiling of this room,’ he said, after a few minutes.

‘Why? Is the plaster cracking again?’

‘No. It’s not that. But the time has come when I want another subject than Prometheus chained to the rock.’

‘And you think that Hans can find one?’

‘I feel sure that he can.’



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